いちばんうしろの大魔王 ACT10

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メイド娘による皇帝簒奪計画発動!!
「やる！　やるですよ、父ちゃん母ちゃん！」
皇位を巡っての新たな騒動が巻き起こる!?

「僕はみんなを愛している。愛する人
が一人だという物語も幻想だ。だから、
僕は君たち全員の気持ちに応えたい」
阿九斗はきっぱりと言い切った。

登場人物紹介
服部絢子（はっとりじゅんこ）
阿九斗に対する恋心は強まる一方の、純情なクラス委員長。阿九斗の発言に動揺を隠しきれない。今回はついに……。
紗伊阿九斗（さいあくと）
皇帝との戦いの後は、けーなの支配下に置かれることで何とか社会復帰。周囲の誤解による困難はまだ続きそう……？
江藤不二子（えとうふじこ）
阿九斗に忠誠を誓う黒魔術師にして薬物使い。真の黒魔術の再興を目指している。
曽我（そが）けーな
「魔王戦争」後、実は皇帝の血筋であることが発覚。皇帝になったり宇宙を飛んだり、その正体の謎は深まる一方。
三輪寛（みわひろし）
阿九斗の弟分を名乗るトラブルメイカー。勇者ブレイブという顔も持つ。
ころね
阿九斗の監視と護衛を行なっていたが、けーなの皇帝即位後はその御側係に。いたずら好き。

リリィ白石
小粋な帽子がトレードマークの生徒会長。
大竹美智恵
蝙蝠の群れに変身できる生徒会副会長。語尾は「ありんす」。
アルヌール
長身のリラダンにして生徒会書記。基本「ぐが」としか言わない。
神山カンナ
狼に変身する能力を持つ生徒会会計。語尾は「ぎゃ」。
木多淑恵
ゼロ復活の一因を作ってしまったが、阿九斗のことを気に入り、その後は協力する。今は何となく学院に居ついている。
けいす
初代魔王ゼロと共に仮想空間内にいた小柄なリラダンの少女。役目は無くなってしまったが、何となく淑恵の元に留まっている。

Prologue

Sasahara Nozomi was the 21st generation.

Of what you ask? Of a family owning an old hot spring inn.

The human lifespan was quite long in this age, so the Sasahara inn had been founded approximately 2000 years ago.

That might sound impressive, but the inn had had poor business for the majority of its history. It was a bit unclear whether one should praise them or insult them.

It had done well just after being founded, but complaints had started to come in when guests came down with food poisoning. From that point on, some kind of incident occurred every ten years. In one great commotion known as the Sasahara Inn Incident, terrorists took the mother of the family hostage. One time, a boiler explosion destroyed half of the inn. The water of the hot spring dried up one day, so they had started putting "essence of hot spring" in normal hot water, but they had been exposed on a national broadcast. People started choosing the inn as a place to hang themselves, so suicides became an almost everyday occurrence. After everything that happened, the family began to suspect the place was cursed, so they had called in a shaman. Legend had it the shaman ran away the instant he stepped through the gate.

After all that, one might wonder why they stayed in business.

"This is the pride of our family," was Nozomi's mother's answer.

Nozomi had asked her countless times as a young child and her mother's answer had always been the same.

"Our family has imperial blood, so we cannot quit."

Nozomi did not really understand what connection there was between having imperial blood and not being able to quit running an inn. In fact, her mother probably did not know either. But if that was what her mother said, she figured it had to be true.

After all, magic and artificial humans known as L'Isle-Adams were ubiquitous in the current age and every imperial citizen was ensured a minimum income and lifestyle. In a society like that, there were only two reasons to work: to give meaning to your life or to earn enough to live more

luxuriously. The Sasahara inn did not give them a luxurious life. In fact, it was a drain on their finances, so they were essentially keeping it open on stubbornness alone.

But that was a problem for Nozomi who was to inherit it. If quitting would result in more money, there was no reason to continue. And if they had imperial blood, shouldn't the empire provide public assistance? For that reason, none of their acquaintances or anyone else believed that the Sasahara family had imperial blood. In the end, no one showed them any respect.

Nozomi's everyday life was naturally filled with melancholy. Inheriting an inn sounded nice, but waiting for customers who never came was tedious. At this rate, she was going to completely waste her 16-year-old youth.

However, she was not tall, she was not all that smart, and she was not very brave. She was aware she did not have what it took to leave her family and make something of herself. The only thing supporting her was the dubious claim that her family had imperial blood.

And so she packed her small body full of pride in her "imperial blood". But one day while watching the news, that pride ended up sending her in a misguided direction.

<We have a new empress. This is an empress of the people who also has enough power to bring the demon king under her control.**>**

As Nozomi ate a modest meal at the tea table, she dropped the dried sardine she held in her chopsticks. She drew in close to the mana screen and stared at the new empress.

It seemed this empress's name was Soga Keena. Everything from her silhouette to her facial features was round. Nozomi could see why she was known as an empress of the people because there was no sense of nobility in this girl at all.

"They can swap out who the empress is?" said Nozomi suddenly.

She did not know the details of how this normal-looking girl who was her own age had become empress, but it seemed it had happened after Empress Kazuko had died. That fact stirred up Nozomi's mind.

—Does that mean anyone can become empress if they have imperial blood?

—Does that mean I could become empress?

—As in, a real empress?

<Empress Keena will be attending Constant Magic Academy. Just like the previous empresses and emperors, she will be mastering all scholarly subjects and she has also lived among the people for a long time.>

The narration introducing Keena continued.

As she listened to it, Nozomi's eyes began spinning around in her head. She had the troublesome tendency of growing confused over even simple things, but the bigger problem was her tendency to take bold actions while confused.

"I'll do it! Mother, father, I'll do it! I'll go to school and speak directly with the empress! I'll do it!" she announced to her parents.

Her parents were dumbfounded. When they finally spoke, it could hardly be called opposition.

"Wait. I don't think you can manage that."

"That is a prestigious school, so I hear its entrance exam is very difficult. There is no way you can get in."

But Nozomi's confusion had spread from her cerebral cortex to her brain stem and she was no longer thinking about anything besides speaking with Soga Keena.

"That's not a problem! I can use this!"

She held out a help wanted ad displayed on a mana screen.

"They're recruiting a janitor?"

"The hospitality I have gained at our inn should work just as well at a school or a train station platform! Being a janitor will be easy!" she confidently declared.

However, her parents calmly pointed out her true nature.

"Hospitality? Have you ever actually done any real work at the inn?"

"In fact, you never even clean up your own room."

"That's because we don't have any guests!" she shouted back.

She knew her parents would have no answer to that.

Her parents did indeed fall silent, so she smiled triumphantly.

"You two can just wait here. I'll make sure to revive the inn! I'll bring us out of this situation where it's just the three of us plus L'Isle-Adam servants! If I can speak with the empress, I can do it!"

With that, she left the house.

When Nozomi finally arrived at Constant Magic Academy's janitor examination, she found a long line of people. Being a janitor at a prestigious school was a position that gave one a direct connection to the school administration and the opportunity to create useful connections with future and current priests.

As Nozomi took her spot in the back of the line, she could not help but feel nervous.

—I might be in trouble. Even if I'm a professional, my ability might not be enough to outdo all of these people at once.

It was unclear where this strange confidence of hers came from, but she looked down on the others there.

The examination included an interview and occupation aptitude diagnosis by an artificial spirit known as Yatagarasu. By referencing a database with records of every action someone had made, that person's optimal occupation could be computed. It looked like fortune telling at first, but the conclusion was based on the person's actions, thought patterns, and physical ability, so it was never wrong. The one exception was Soga Keena. She had been diagnosed as a nurse but had become empress. However, some said empress was not an occupation, so it was still considered almost perfectly accurate in predicting everything from "system engineer" to "demon king". There were of course people who took on a different occupation if they had a good reason such as continuing the family business, but that rarely turned out well.

Using this aptitude diagnosis to find a new employee was considered to be quite fair. If the school chose someone diagnosed as a butler or educator, the person was guaranteed to do a good job. Those taking the examination were aware of this, but a lot of them were taking part despite knowing their optimal occupation. It was not unusual for someone ideal to not show up and so someone from a similar occupation would be chosen.

Nozomi had never undergone an aptitude diagnosis before, so she nervously approached the three-legged crow.

Once her diagnosis was complete, Yatagarasu shouted out in its unique high-pitched voice.

"Janitor!"

This surprised the administrators running the examination.

"Ehh!? Someone like that is one in ten thousand!"

A janitor was simply someone who maintained the school, so it was not exactly a profession. Someone for whom that was "optimal" was rare. In fact, that was why they had been searching for someone like this.

"Amazing…"

"There's really someone like that?"

The other examinees began muttering amongst themselves when they heard Nozomi's result. Their voices were filled with a mixture of envy and disappointment. They had all been diagnosed as university professors, priests, or other prestigious jobs, but their dreams had been crushed not long after getting up from that seat. They had come here seeking connections, yet a natural born janitor had appeared before them. None of them knew what to say.

But Nozomi simply interpreted it as a compliment.

—I can do this! I can! Ancestors, are you watching? I've never shined brighter!

Her eyes glittered with excitement.

And thus a new janitor was born.

Her name was Sasahara Nozomi.

This was the job she had been born to do.

Chapter 1: The Janitor's Frightening Trap!

After becoming empress, Soga Keena was supposed to quietly perform her imperial duties, but she would occasionally…no, constantly run off and cause trouble for those around her.

"My only real duties are praying and signing things. Doing that boring stuff for so long is hard work."

Keena was sitting on Akuto's bed and talking on and on. She had torn Akuto's blanket from him and wrapped it around herself, she had her beloved rice cooker in front of her, and she was scooping white rice into her mouth using a wooden spoon.

Akuto sat up in bed and listened to her speak for a while, but then he checked the time.

It was currently 5:30 in the morning and he had about half an hour until he had to get up.

That meant one thing: this young empress, who had red tufts of hair on the top of her head, a round face, a stomach that acted as a black hole for white rice, and a mysterious side that occasionally showed itself, had snuck into his dorm room at dawn and begun munching on rice.

"Isn't that going to give you a stomachache?"

Akuto pointed at the rice cooker.

"Did you know that the palace only allows me two bowls of rice?"

He was unsure if that qualified as an answer or not.

"Maybe, but no other guy has to worry about a rice cooker's chime going off at five in the morning," he complained.

"It's not my fault. The imperial guards have gotten used to me, so they stop me from taking off my clothes when I try to disappear. If I don't slip away early in the morning, I can't escape."

Keena had the special ability to use invisibility magic and she would use that ability to escape.

"I'm glad the imperial guards are normal people."

Akuto yawned in his bed and Keena pouted her lips.

"A-chan, you don't get to talk about people being normal."

She had a point. It had been said that Sai Akuto would become the demon king in the future and he had already done so. He was far from normal.

But on the inside, he was a diligent person. While still wearing his pajamas, he began cleaning up the room Keena had messed up searching for the rice cooker.

"I've had enough excitement. I know I won't be able to live a normal life, so I want to remain as secluded from the world as possible. My dream of being a priest seems even further off now. Not just that. It's impossible. But I still want to live a proper life. And to do that, I need you to be a proper empress. If you take your job seriously, it might be possible to reform the political system from the inside," said Akuto while returning his scattered clothing to the closet.

Despite being a living combat machine, he had returned to a normal school life. This was thanks to the empress's ability to control the demon king. That meant he had to live his life while under Keena's control. His life was reliant on Keena, so it was natural for him to want to lecture here at times.

And it seemed his words actually reached Keena.

"You're right. I need to focus on being empress!"

After that resolute statement, she licked some rice off of the spoon, returned it to the rice cooker, and stood up.

"First, I need to reform the school! Yes, I need to make sure everyone understands how great rice is!"

With a determined look on her face, Keena vigorously clenched her fist and took the pose of a goddess standing up in revolution.

However, she was currently naked.

The blanket wrapped around her fell and exposed her rather stumpy body.

"Keena!"

Akuto closed his eyes when he noticed.

"Eh? What? …Hyah!"

Once she looked down at her own body and finally caught on, Keena frantically picked up the blanket.

"A-chan, you perv. I'm still the same as when I disappeared."

"You did all that on your own. I need to get you some clothes."

He started to leave the room, but someone called out to stop him.

"That will not be necessary."

A shelf near the ceiling opened and a girl with doll-like beauty appeared from within. She skillfully bent her body to slip out of the thin shelf door. Despite falling from higher than the average adult's height, she rotated her body like a cat and splendidly landed in the center of the room.

She could make these inhuman actions because she was an artificial human known as a L'Isle-Adam. She was Akuto and Keena's observer and her name was Korone.

"I am one of the empress's maids, after all. Now, here are your clothes."

Korone stuck a hand into the bag hanging from her shoulder and she pulled out a school uniform. It was a small bag, but most anything could fit inside because the interior was a virtual alternate dimension.

"Yay! Thanks."

Keena cheerfully took the clothes. Korone immediately circled behind Akuto and covered his eyes with her hands.

"I wasn't going to try to watch her change."

"But a teenage boy's desire for female nudity is quite powerful. It is enough to drive you to bike through the night to reach a vending machine the next town over."

"I don't have that much willpower," argued Akuto.

But Korone silently continued to cover his eyes.

After changing into the uniform, Keena made an announcement.

"As empress, I will start by reforming the school. I will reform it with the power of rice. By reminding everyone of the forgotten appeal of rice, I will change the students' state of mind! I call it the Rice Renaissance! I will bring back the mindset of the ancient empire that loved rice so that our youths can grow up healthy! And I will ultimately change all of the empire's land into a giant rice field!"

"That's crazy," said Akuto, but Korone drowned him out with applause.

"What a wonderful idea! Long live the empress!"

"Y'know…"

Akuto turned toward Korone, but her expressionless look made it impossible to tell what she was thinking. Even so, she started egging Korone on.

"I, Korone, shall do whatever I can to aid your majesty. All glory to the empress!"

"No, Korone-chan. All glory should go to rice!" said Keena while almost looking like a saint.

"Seriously…?" complained Akuto.

Keena's statements had been so ridiculous that he had thought her ideas would never be carried out.

But Keena's Rice Renaissance began as soon as midday.

The dining hall was always crowded during the lunch break, but it was even busier than usual today.

The line of students stretched outside of the dining hall and showed no sign of moving. The problem existed at the front of the line.

"Spaghetti and meat sauce please."

The person at the front was Etou Fujiko. She used her supple and slender fingers to elegantly place her meal ticket on the counter.

She had the elegance of a refined, black-haired girl. She was so popular among the girls that they practically idolized her. However, she had an outer and inner personality. Deep down, she was truly a bad person. She worshiped Akuto from the bottom of her heart. She did not hide that, but the other girls thought she had been brainwashed by the demon king.

"We have no spaghetti."

Fujiko looked over the counter in shock.

She had recognized the voice.

Korone was standing behind the dining hall counter.

"What are you doing, Korone? And what do you mean you do not have spaghetti?"

"On the empress's orders, I am in charge of the dining hall today," explained Korone with an emotionless voice. "As for the spaghetti, I apologize, but we do not have what we do not have. You can use the same meal ticket, but please change your order."

"I suppose I have no choice. Udon would be nice. I will have a kitsune udon," said Fujiko with a kind smile.

"We do not have any," replied Korone immediately.

"What? You do not have udon either?" asked Fujiko in surprise.

"Correct. Please give your order."

Fujiko now understood why the line was so long, but she could not comprehend anything beyond that. With a doubtful look, she changed her order once more.

"Tempura soba would be fine."

"We do not have any."

The response was immediate once more.

"Ramen."

"None of that either."

"Yakisoba?"

"My apologies."

"Kishimen?"

"Of course not."

"Fine, hiyashi chuuka!"

"Why would we have that?'

"I am in the mood for noodles today! Surely you have some kind of noodle!"

Fujiko raised her voice, but Korone's voice was as calm as ever.

"Noodles? We do have rice noodles."

"What? Rice noodles?"

"Yes. Even that was a compromise."

At that point, Fujiko realized what was happening.

"That's right. Soga Keena is now the empress."

"Precisely. She wishes to convey the wonders of rice, so we are serving a menu of nothing but rice. Meal K is recommended."

"Meal K…" fearfully muttered Fujiko.

Meal K was a frightening meal put together specifically for Keena. Even the fried foods and the soup used rice, so no normal person could finish eating it. The main side dish was rice croquettes.

"So that is what caused this disaster."

Fujiko looked around. The line was so long because the others had argued just as Fujiko had. Some students had received food and sat down, but they had all stopped eating with looks of despair covering their faces. A close inspection showed all of them had Meal K sitting in front of them.

"Why are you doing this?' asked Fujiko in a low voice.

She gave the most frightening expression she allowed herself in front of the other students.

But Korone's expression did not change.

"I was ordered to spread rice around."

"I do not understand any of this, but I demand the menu be changed back!"

Fujiko's loud announcement received agreement from the students lined up behind her. They had remained silent so far, but Fujiko led them to shout in agreement.

"That's right, that's right!"

"This is imperial tyranny!"

"Give us bread! Give us noodles!"

The students broke the line and began pressing in against the counter.

"The students want noodles? Let them eat rice."

Korone stood before the rioting students, boldly folded her arms, and made that announcement.

This only made the students more furious.

"What!?"

"Just because you're cute doesn't mean you get to act like an empress!"

"It may be Korone-chan saying it, but she has a real empress backing her."

"At any rate, just return the menu to normal!"

The dining hall was not exactly small, but one had to vacate their seat as soon as they finished eating on a normal day. The students soon began to fill every inch around the counter.

And amid it all, Korone responded calmly…or rather, expressionlessly.

"You leave me no choice. Let us negotiate. I will add curry rice to the menu."

Korone's concession caused the students' emotions to explode.

"You mean curry was off limits before!?"

"So was Meal K and white rice really all that was on the menu?"

"Screw that! We're not going to negotiate! Either give us the full menu or it's war!"

"That's right! We want normal food!"

"This is our rice riot!"

The students' expressions had grown violent. The academy had been filled with belligerent students from the beginning, but none of them would lose their cool easily. Nevertheless, a full-blown riot was breaking out. Grudges over food were frightening.

"I have a feeling this is not quite the same as a rice riot, but I must interpret your statements as threats of violence against me," said Korone.

The students' expressions grew nervous and a stir spread through them like a wave.

Would they do it or not? That dangerous atmosphere filled the dining hall. Everyone there was well aware of Korone's combat ability, but the crowd was too hungry and enraged to leave their combat stances.

"We demand food! Return the menu!"

"We are not afraid to fight!"

"Isn't that right, Etou-san?"

The students right in front of the counter sought agreement from Fujiko who had started this riot.

But she had vanished from the front of the line.

"Huh?"

The students in front of the counter found it odd that Fujiko was missing after stirring up the riot, but they did not have time to think on it.

The next thing they knew, a dangerous voice came from behind Korone.

"What's going on out there?"

It was a casual question. In other words, it was not the words or the voice that were dangerous. It was Sai Akuto who poked his head out that was dangerous.

The students all moved away from the counter.

"N-no fair! You can't use someone that dangerous in your negotiations!"

"You're trying to threaten us, aren't you!?"

"Let's keep this peaceful! Let's drink some tea and calmly discuss it!"

All of them began speaking fearfully. This was not surprising. This was the person who had fought in a great battle which had brought great disaster to the imperial capital. The current empress had sided with him, so he had not been blamed, but he was still the demon king.

"K-Korone-chan, why is the demon king there?" asked the student in the lead with a trembling voice.

"He is helping," answered Korone.

She was not lying. Akuto was cooking rice in a large pot and dividing it into rice bowls.

But the students did not interpret her words so simply.

"H-helping!?"

"The demon king would never help cook. He must be a bodyguard!"

Akuto's expression stiffened when he heard that.

—I'm actually a pretty good cook.

But despite thinking that, he did not say it out loud. And that resulted in frightening the students further.

"H-he's mad!"

"He's ready to fight!"

"Eeeee! How frightening!"

Something could be heard collapsing within the crowd. It seemed someone had fainted.

—Is it just me or has this gotten even worse than before?

Akuto was inwardly confused, but he more or less grasped the situation. He turned to Korone with an even harsher expression.

"Korone, care to explain this?"

Korone answered without changing her expression in the slightest.

"I tried feeding them rice and they rioted."

It was a simple explanation.

Akuto brought a hand to his forehead.

"Did you not do what I told you to do? Even if you're going to feed them rice, there's a better way to do it. What are you going to do now? You've clearly failed here."

Despite his scolding, Korone's expression remained unchanged, but the students could not remain calm.

They had interpreted his words differently.

"She didn't do what he told her to? I see. So this was all on the demon king's instructions!"

"He was trying to make us eat only rice so we'd be vitamin deficient and get beriberi!"

"What a terrifying plan!"

"And he even used the empress's love of rice! He was trying to place the blame on the empress!"

"That's right! Keena-chan and our cute Korone-chan would never do something like this!"

"He used them and now he's rebuking Korone-chan for the failure of his own plan!"

—I don't entirely understand, but why does this always have to happen?

Akuto despaired in his heart.

But he still gathered his strength and faced the students.

"Well, let's set aside that pile of misunderstandings. How about we sit down and talk about this?"

He smiled.

The smile may not have been the best, but he had a beautiful yet villainous face. When he smiled asked them to talk, it brought only fear to those before him.

Screams filled the dining hall and students rushed for the exit.

—Ah…

By the time Akuto realized his error, the dining hall was deserted.

The only motion in the empty space was the fallen meal tickets blowing in the wind.

"It appears the problem has been resolved," said Korone calmly.

"Y'know, this was definitely caused by you changing the menu to nothing but rice," complained Akuto after checking the menu and realizing what had happened.

"I was following my orders from the empress."

"She only told you to try to get them to eat more rice."

"Yes, but I decided to take a more forceful route."

"More forceful?" asked Akuto.

"Very forceful," said Korone with a nod.

"Doesn't that make this your fault?"

"You could look at it that way."

"You started a riot for no reason, didn't you?"

"Some might say so."

"You were enjoying it, weren't you?"

"A bit."

"……Eh?"

"A bit," repeated Korone.

Akuto cleared his throat a bit.

"Ahem… I-I see."

"Do not worry. A bit means that was not the only reason. You could even interpret it to mean I meant no harm and merely enjoyed what accidentally happened," she said with a serious expression.

"You don't have to explain it."

"Really? Then I will excuse myself as I clean up. I will call in the empress and have her announce that foods other than rice will be made available. Fortunately, the students have mistakenly concluded that this was the demon king's doing."

Korone bowed, but her comment made it seem like she had predicted all of this.

"Did you know it would turn out this way from the beginning?"

"You could say that," she said without turning around.

—Well, it isn't too surprising. And I'm all for using my position to improve Keena's popularity as empress.

Akuto accepted it that way, but he could not suppress the increased desire to start living a reclusive life of doing nothing but read all day.

The new janitor named Sasahara Nozomi walked through Constant Magic Academy's schoolyard. She was free to choose her own clothing but had been told to wear something she could get dirty, so she wore the maid uniform she used as a uniform at home. She was poor, so that was her only option.

Her first job was to inspect the sensors on the school buildings. If one was broken, the manufacturer would repair it, but the janitor was the one to check them daily.

She finished the job quickly. Either her run-down home had finally come in handy or she was showing off her skill as a natural born janitor because she completed the job with several times the skill of a normal person. She was currently on her way to the final inspection.

That was when loud voices reached her ears.

"Long live the empress!"

Her ears twitched and light reflected off her exposed forehead.

"The empress?"

She ran toward the voices and found Keena surrounded by cheering students. She was not aware of this, but these cheers were for returning the dining hall to normal.

—That's her!

Her eyes were fixed on Keena. She had not noticed on the broadcast, but Keena's face was quite foolish-looking in addition to looking like a commoner.

—Wh-why does she look so foolish?

Nozomi's eyes began to spin around and her thoughts fell into chaos.

—An idiot like that can become empress?

—Is bloodline really all that matters?

—That means I can become empress too!

—But there already is an empress.

She finally reached an incorrect conclusion.

"I know! I can talk with her and have her give me the position of empress!"

She had arrived at the school with no plan, so it was only natural that she came up with a reckless answer. However, she turned back toward Keena while convinced that her idea was brilliant.

—Now, how can I get a chance to talk with her?

Keena was surrounded by students, so she could never get close.

—I need to wait for a good opportunity.

She hid behind a cleaning supplies locker at the back of the school building.

Finally, the students started back toward the newly freed dining hall. Only Keena and Korone remained and they began walking while discussing something.

—Th-they're coming this way!

Nozomi felt her pulse quicken as the two girls approached.

—Th-this is no time to be nervous. O-oh, no…

Despite what she told herself, she was nervous.

She had always been timid.

—E-ee! H-here they come!

The two girls were almost to her now.

"I had the new palace's yard made into a rice paddy."

"I figured you would do that."

"Eh!? How did you know?"

She could hear their conversation now.

—Okay, let's do this.

—No, once they're a little closer.

—Okay, now.

—No, maybe it would be better to start from behind after they pass by.

She hesitated.

And unsurprisingly, Keena and Korone passed by right in front of her while she hesitated.

By the time she made up her mind and jumped out, they were long gone.

—Wh-why? How?

In her confusion, her eyes started spinning around again and her thoughts started in an incorrect direction. To make a long story short, she ultimately reached a completely wrong conclusion.

—My only option is to set a trap to stop her and talk to her!

She decided to use her special authority as janitor to check on Keena's daily schedule, so she quickly finished her work and then checked the class schedule using the shared terminal in the janitorial room.

"According to the empress's class schedule, she'll move between classes here!"

She knew where to set her trap: the path between classes.

—What kind of trap should I use? Should I put birdlime on the ground? No, birdlime is hard to use and it would stick to other people as they passed by. But I want to use birdlime in the end. Then I need to put it somewhere other people won't go. I know! I can put it on the wall. Real high up on the wall. Up where even someone with flight magic wouldn't normally go. That means I need something to lead her up there.

Her thoughts had reached a point that it was needless to mention that they were wrong.

Ultimately, her plan was as follows:

She would place banana peel on the path Keena would walk down. Keena would slip and face upwards. A flyer for a sale on rice would be placed up above. When she walked in the direction indicated by the flyer, she would reach an empty passageway. A bag of rice would be placed on the ground there. When she grabbed it, a metal washtub would fall from above. It would hit her head and make her stagger to the side where she would fall on a trampoline. The trampoline would send her flying upwards where she would stick to the birdlime placed high on the wall.

—And I'll be waiting at the window next to her where I can casually talk to her. It's perfect! Simply perfect! I'm so brilliant it scares me!

It certainly took a type of brilliance to think that would work. At any rate, Nozomi began setting up the trap. After doing so, she waited for Keena to arrive. According to the schedule, Keena would travel alone after the other classmates had passed by.

After watching Keena's classmates walk by while excitedly talking, Nozomi placed a banana peel in the center of the hallway and quickly hid behind a column.

"Heh heh heh. Now she'll trip."

Nozomi snickered.

But it was not Keena who appeared. It was the beautiful L'Isle-Adam who had accompanied her.

—Did she send her servant on ahead?

Nozomi gasped, but she was even more shocked when the L'Isle-Adam – Korone – walked forward and tossed the banana peel in a trashcan.

"My perfect plan…"

It was unclear what about the plan was perfect, but Nozomi seemed to turn to white ashes.

Just as she was about to collapse, a voice suddenly called out to her.

"Excuse me."

"……Eh?"

She came back to her senses and looked over. To her surprise, Korone's face was directly in front of her.

"Hyaaah!"

She tried to run away, but Korone calmly grabbed her arm.

"Please wait."

"Eeee! Forgive me! Show mercy! I only did it on a whim!"

"What are you talking about? I only called out to you because you were staring off into the distance."

"Eh? Then you don't know I set a trap?"

"A trap? You set a trap?'

"Oh, no! How did you find out!?"

Completely forgetting that Korone held her arm, Nozomi tried to run away, but that was of course impossible. She merely tugged on her arm and fell forward.

"Are you perhaps an idiot?" expressionlessly asked Korone.

"Uuh… I don't want to be called an idiot…but I was a huge idiot just now."

She readily gave in, fell to her knees, and began to sob.

"Crying will not help. Now, confess your crimes. What is this trap? Why did you set it?"

Korone looked down at her as she asked these questions.

Nozomi wiped away the tears and began to honestly confess what she had done. She confessed that she had set up birdlime in order to capture the empress, that she had wanted to speak with the empress, and that she had imperial blood.

"I see. So that is why you set up this ridiculous trap."

"That's right. But I wasn't trying to hurt her."

"I cannot believe you tried to capture her with this trap."

"I said I was sorry. I really am."

"Yes. It was quite naïve to think this trap would work."

"Eh?"

Nozomi looked up.

Korone nodded expressionlessly.

"You cannot take the empress's place with this trap. You need to think more realistically."

"Eh? Eh? Eh? What?"

Korone went on to teach Nozomi her mistake.

"Think about it. You will not become empress if you merely capture her and speak with her."

"Y-you're right. Capturing her and speaking with her isn't enough…"

"Yes. A peaceful talk will accomplish nothing."

"Eh?"

"In a negotiation, you must find a way to get your opponent to accept your terms. In other words, your odds of success are much higher if you negotiate with them while they are in some type of predicament," calmly explained Korone.

"W-wait. Then…"

Noticing something was odd, Nozomi hesitantly spoke up, but the look on Korone's face remained perfectly serious. In fact, her expression did not change in the slightest. Even so, Nozomi understood what it was Korone was saying.

"You mean I should threaten her?"

Korone shook her head.

"Of course not. It is a negotiation. Some may view it as a threat, though."

"I can't! I can't do that! I just can't! …But just for reference, how exactly would I threa- negotiate with her?"

Nozomi squeezed her eyes shut while firmly grabbing Korone's hand.

"First, you must make the trap something harmless. However, you still must have room for negotiation. In other words, you should corner her mentally," said Korone.

Nozomi appeared to be thinking and she finally clapped her hands together.

"So for example, I could make her naked in front of everyone if she was caught by the trap?"

"That would be one method," agreed Korone.

"Ahh! Thanks! You're really nice!"

Nozomi thanked her while crying. She let go of Korone's hand to begin working on the trap, but she quickly realized she did not know what to do.

"Um, what should I do for a trap?"

"I see. Allow me to give you some advice. With you, something complex would be a bad idea. The simpler, the better. You should follow two general rules: it should not use mana and it should accomplish its goal in a single step," calmly explained Korone. "It should not use mana because

that will delay the detection of the trap by the students who are skilled at magic. And it should accomplish its goal in a single step because more quickly shaming them will obstruct the mental focus needed to use magic and lengthen the span of the shaming."

"I see. This is very useful."

Nozomi began taking notes.

"In that case, there are only a few effective types of traps. Here are the diagrams."

Korone opened a mana screen and displayed detailed information on the traps.

"Why do you have this stuff saved?"

Korone pointed at the screen without answering Nozomi's question.

"The trick here is this rope. It activates once the rope is pulled."

"I see, I see."

Nozomi was easily convinced and she began nodding.

"A trap that catches their feet in a rope and hangs them upside down is effective, but it is dangerous and should be avoided. I suggest dumping a special chemical on their head."

"A chemical?"

"Use this."

Korone pulled a bottle from the bag she carried and held it above her head.

"Clothmeltium!"

"Cl-cloth-what?"

"Clothmeltium. This frightening potion melts only clothing."

"That's a very straightforward name."

"Blame the one who named it. It uses bacteria to melt the synthetic fibers."

"So it'll leave them in their underwear right away! Or naked if their underwear has synthetic fibers!"

"Exactly."

Korone nodded and held the bottle out toward Nozomi.

"Dilute it thirty times before using it. This bottle is enough for three buckets' worth."

"B-but…" Nozomi hesitated. "Isn't this going a bit too far?"

"Is it? You are merely making her naked to negotiate with her. I fail to see the problem."

Korone tried to force the bottle into her hands.

"Th-there isn't a problem, but…um… E-eeee!"

Nozomi cowered down.

She had always been timid, so she naturally grew afraid when someone talked about this plan so excitedly. In her eyes, Korone looked like Mephistopheles. She was quite the expressionless demon.

The small girl's trembling fingers reached for the bottle.

And then…

"Korone, who is that?"

A male voice suddenly approached.

"Hyaaaaah!"

Nozomi screamed and ran away.

"Wait…"

The boy, Akuto, spoke up in confusion, but Nozomi did not hear him. She ran around in complete confusion and finally settled down behind a thicket somewhere. She caught her breath and realized she held the bottle in her hands.

"I-I have it."

She gulped.

And…

"Ah, why is there a copy of the design on my terminal mana screen!?"

"Korone, who was that?"

Akuto tilted his head as he watched Nozomi run away.

"The janitor," said Korone casually.

"Then why was she dressed like a maid? No, that isn't the issue. What were you two doing?"

"She appeared to be a pitiful person with strange delusions, so I was speaking with her."

"What?"

Akuto tilted his head again.

"She was trying to capture the empress with a bizarre trap. She planned to leave this banana peel here."

Korone returned the banana peel to its original spot.

"I don't follow."

"You don't? That simply shows how bizarre the situation was. The empress was safe because she was skipping her class, but I was trying to determine what that janitor had done and possibly arrest her. However, you showed up and let her escape," declared Korone.

Akuto was troubled.

"You mean it was my fault?"

"I did not say that."

"But if you were trying to capture her…"

"She had not committed enough of a crime to be arrested, so I was technically setting things up for that."

"I still don't understand. You weren't making the situation more complicated just for the fun of it, were you?"

"A bit."

"You can't do that."

"Do not worry. I was 80% serious."

"Y'know…"

Akuto gave up on that confusing conversation and decided to pursue the maid janitor. He left Korone behind and jogged in the direction Nozomi had disappeared in.

—Um, I think she went this way.

He travelled to the side of the school building and found Nozomi in a narrow passageway students would travel along between classes.

The short janitor in a maid uniform was in the middle of setting up a primitive trap.

She was leaning over in a thicket to the side and rummaging around with some rope.

"Excuse me," he called out.

He received a scream in response.

"Hyaaaah!"

And in the next instant, Nozomi was already running away.

"Wait!"

He tried to stop her, but she disappeared around the corner of the building in no time.

He tried to pursue her but stopped once he noticed Nozomi's trap at his feet.

—That was close. This must be the trap Korone mentioned.

He had only noticed because he had looked down where she had been working, but a narrow piece of fishing line was stretched across at his feet. If he had walked normally, he would have tripped it. And a bucket was set up to dump a liquid on him if he did. The bucket was cleverly hidden behind a tree branch, so no one would notice it if they were not looking for it.

"I need to get that out of the way first."

He followed the fishing line, found the contraption hidden on the tree trunk, and thought about how to dismantle the trap without causing the bucket to fall.

—If I remove this rope, the bucket will fall, so maybe I should just let it happen while no one is here.

He then started to remove the contraption created from a branch and a stone weight.

"What are you doing over there?"

But then he heard a voice.

"Wah! Don't move!" he frantically shouted.

Hattori Junko had arrived. The girl was the class representative and had a deep connection with Akuto. She had a dignified presence, a straightforward personality, and popularity with her comrades, but Akuto alone knew she could actually be quite careless.

And he had a bad feeling about what it meant that someone as careless as her was here.

"What do you mean 'don't move'? What are you hiding over there!?"

Junko began walking over with long strides.

"I said stop!"

He tried to stop her, but she only lengthened her strides.

"You are acting quite suspicious! What are you…ah!"

Her foot had hit the fishing line.

"Ah!"

Akuto frantically tried to grab the rope supporting the bucket, but the impact of Junko's foot had caused the stone weight to fall more quickly than expected. The rope slipped straight through his fingers.

"Wah!"

She almost tripped, but just barely managed to keep her balance.

But that had been a mistake.

The bucket's contents splashed over her entire body.

"Bh…! What is this!?"

As she looked up and shook her head to throw the moisture from her hair, Akuto walked over.

"Um, well…"

He waved his hands back and forth.

She did not know what that meant, so she walked forward.

"Do not try to trick me! Why would you pull this childish prank?"

In her anger, she pointed at Akuto. However, the sleeve covering that outstretched arm was falling to pieces.

"Wh-what is… Ehhhhhh!?"

Her eyes opened wide in surprise and her entire uniform began to fall from her body.

"Eeee!"

She covered herself with her arms and crouched down. Fortunately, she wore cloth bandages and a loincloth for underwear, so they did not melt away.

"A-are you okay?"

He hurried over to her, removed his jacket, and placed it over her.

She pulled the jacket tightly around herself and glared sharply up at him with tears in her eyes.

"H-how dare you. I thought it was just a childish prank, but this is truly cruel. Did you really go to so much trouble just to remove my clothes?"

"No, I wasn't trying to remove your clothes."

"I see. So the trap was meant to remove the clothes of whoever walked by. I-if you had wanted to see me naked, I could have forgiven you, but…"

She bit her lips and stood up. She put her arms through the jacket's sleeves to cover her body and gathered mana light in her hand.

"Wait a second! That isn't it either."

"I do not believe you. You felt like pulling a prank on the normal students now that your power is sealed, didn't you!?"

"No, that isn't it."

"Fortunately, I can punish you as you are now. And I know it takes a lot to kill you."

She approached him with a fierce look.

The normal students were mistaken due to their limited knowledge of the situation, but he did not have the ridiculous power he had gained after awakening. His body was sturdy, but his mana control was still imperfect. In other words, he would feel pain when punched.

"No, um…"

He slowly stepped backwards.

"Trying to run shows you have not learned your lesson! Prepare yourself!"

Junko fired a mana sphere. Akuto dodged it and fled.

"Wah!"

"Argh! Get back here!"

"If I stop, you'll hit me!"

"Of course I will!"

Junko and Akuto ran around while shouting angrily.

This commotion was noticed by Fujiko who had been the first to escape from the commotion in the dining hall. She had been in a quiet spot behind the school building eating a pasta lunch she had bought outside the school.

"Oh? What is this commotion?"

She looked up while sitting on a bench, realized Junko was chasing Akuto around, and frantically stood up.

"Hold it! What do you think you are doing!?"

She shouted angrily and began pursuing Junko.

"You may be an upperclassman, but I will not let you stop this punishment!" shouted Junko to Fujiko.

"I do not know what happened, but you must obey Akuto-sama! That is our duty!" she shouted angrily back.

"What do you mean 'our'!? When did I become a part of your group!?"

"That is not what I meant! All of humanity must obey him!"

"Do not be ridiculous!"

The two girls shouted back and forth while continuing to run.

"Either way, please stop chasing me!"

Akuto shouted behind him, but he stopped in surprise when he looked ahead once more.

"Ah! Wait! That's dangerous!"

He had seen Nozomi running from behind something and hiding. And that meant she had prepared a trap nearby.

"Dangerous? You cannot trick me!"

Junko jumped into the air to attack him.

"Hold it!"

Fujiko ran forward to stop her.

And…

Her foot hit something and she tripped.

"Ah!"

"Eh?"

Akuto and Junko watched as Fujiko fell forward and stopped moving.

A liquid poured on her from above.

"Wait. What is this?"

She stood up and her clothes melted away. Without noticing, she struck a grand pose while in her underwear.

"Ahh…"

Akuto covered his face with a hand.

"Etou-san!"

Junko frantically waved her hand.

"Wh-what is it? …Oh? H-hyaaaah!"

She covered herself with her arms, blushed, and looked to Akuto.

"If you wished to see me naked, you only had to ask. …And this is hardly the time!"

Her tone of voice changed partway through and she suddenly swiped Akuto's jacket that Junko was wearing.

"W-wah Hyah! Wh-what are you doing!?"

Junko covered her body and crouched down.

"Oh ho ho ho ho! I was wondering why you were wearing Akuto-sama's jacket, but now I understand. And his jacket is wasted on you!"

She placed the jacket over her shoulders and adoringly rubbed her cheek against the collar.

"Y-you may be an upperclassman, but I cannot let you treat me like this.

Junko ground her teeth and glared at Fujiko, but she could not move from her crouched position.

"I'm not sure what to say…"

Akuto removed his shirt and placed it over Junko.

"Ah! I think I would rather have that…" muttered Fujiko as she looked down at Junko putting on and buttoning up the shir.t

"D-do not be ridiculous." Junko blushed. "Who would want this sweat-stained shirt?"

"That is what makes it such a prize!"

Fujiko's eyes were sparkling.

"Um… I'll just ignore that argument," interrupted Akuto. "Anyway, you know I didn't do it now, right?"

"I did see something strange run away."

Junko looked away awkwardly.

"So you are saying someone thought up this ridiculous contraption?" asked Fujiko. She looked around and opened her eyes a bit. "Oh?"

"What is it?" asked Akuto, but he did not have to wait for an answer.

He quickly realized a large number of students were watching from a distance.

"What's this? Exhibitionism?"

"Ah, the demon king is toying with Fujiko-sama again."

"Fujiko-sama is one thing, but the class rep is only wearing a shirt."

"I can't believe they would do this at the school."

Akuto heard people muttering.

"It appears a crowd has formed. Well, I have no problem letting them see."

Fujiko seemed calm, but Junko quickly paled.

"Wah, wah, wah! Why must you humiliate me like this!?"

"I already told you it wasn't me," complained Akuto.

However, Junko was not listening due to her embarrassment.

"Shut up! This has to be your fault! Argh, I've had enough! I can think about it after I punish you!"

She finally pulled a sword from somewhere and charged toward Akuto.

"Please try to think about it now!"

As she pursued him, he had no choice but to run.

"Wait! Stop trying to attack Akuto-sama!"

Fujiko began pursuing Junko once more.

"Ah, this is just going to make it harder to find that girl," complained Akuto.

He looked around for Nozomi as he ran and a look of shock filled his face.

"I can't let him embarrass girls like this!"

"But he's the demon king. What if you anger him?"

"He can't use his full strength right now. Let's surround him and insult him so he can't recover!"

"This is getting interesting."

"We might get to see something sexy."

"Yeah, I want to see more of the class rep in just a shirt."

"Boys, we told you to stop that!"

While loudly speaking and arguing, a large group of students began to move. Akuto was of course at the lead. Most of the students following him did not understand the situation and some were simply following the crowd.

"What the hell is going on!?" he shouted as he began searching for Nozomi all the more desperately.

—Ah! I did it without thinking again!

Nozomi held her head in her hands.

Akuto, Junko, and Fujiko were currently running after each other. Nozomi had set up the trap that stripped Fujiko without even thinking about it.

"How did this get so far out of hand?"

She regretfully fled on unsteady feet. After a bit, she noticed something odd: a rumbling noise.

"Wh-what is this?"

She looked around and noticed a distant cloud of dust.

—Wh-wh-what? No one told me all this would happen.

The cloud gradually approached. Once she realized it was a stampede of over one hundred students, she completely lost her senses in fear.

"Kyaaaaaaah!"

Her eyes rolled around in her head and she reached a mistaken and incredible conclusion.

—I-I have no choice but to do it. No one can stop it now.

"Why must I be humiliated so!?"

"A proper lady transforms it into pleasure!"

Junko and Fujiko both shouted out.

"Either way, can you two stop chasing me? …No, I suppose not," complained Akuto.

The other students were pressing in from behind. If the two girls stopped, they would be overwhelmed by that surging wave.

—At any rate, I need to find that tiny maid… Ah!

In that moment, he spotted Nozomi and began moving toward her. She seemed to be on her way to the gym.

—If I grab her and have her explain the situation, I should be able to resolve this.

Nozomi had apparently entered the gym. It had multiple exits, but they were not easy to find. With any luck, he could corner her here.

"This might just work."

He charged into the gym and spotted Nozomi climbing up onto the stage at the very back of the gym.

"Hold it right there!"

He shouted toward her, but she swiftly fled to the side of the stage.

"Oh, c'mon…"

He pursued her, but Junko and Fujiko were of course approaching from behind him. And all the other students were behind them.

"Ah, I'm going to be trapped in the gym. Well, it should be fine since that girl doesn't have anywhere to escape to."

As he muttered to himself, Akuto ran up onto the stage. He looked up and spotted Nozomi standing in front of the gym's lights and curtain control panel on the second floor behind the stage.

"Ah! Hey, don't be afraid! I'm not going to hurt you!"

He called out to her, but perfect spirals had appeared in her eyes.

"Liar! You're going to capture me and do all sorts of things to me, aren't you? Yes, I already know the truth. That's what you're going to do."

"No, it isn't!"

"If not, then what are all those people for?"

She pointed behind him.

He turned around and found the gym packed full of students.

"That just kind of happened…"

Despite Akuto's argument, Nozomi shook her head.

"Even so, it still means I can't escape! That's right. I have no choice but do this."

She reached for the control panel.

"Do what?" frantically asked Akuto.

"Hmph." Nozomi struck the control panel. "Do this!"

Behind Akuto, rain began to fall all throughout the gym. The cold rain audibly fell.

"That isn't rain. Is it the sprinklers?"

Sure enough, the sprinklers on the roof had activated. Water poured down over every inch of the gym.

"That's cold!"

"What is this?"

"Don't think you can escape."

The students began to grow louder. After all, they were crammed inside the gym.

"Water? …It can't be!"

Akuto looked up at Nozomi in surprise.

She was in a complete state of confusion, so she shouted back.

"I told you I had no choice but to do this!"

The angry cries of the students filling the gym finally changed to screams.

"Hyaaaaaaaaah!"

"Gyaaaaaaaaah!"

"Waaaaaaaaaah!"

"Ahhhhhhhhhh!"

The gym shook from both male and female screams and it began to fill with the color of flesh.

Everyone was either naked or in their underwear. In other words, they had all lost their uniforms.

The girls began using magic to knock back the boys and the boys tried to fly away to escape, but everyone simultaneously using magic in that confined space quickly used up all the surrounding mana. The students hit the walls, tripped, or fell on a nearby person and accidentally pulled off their underwear. It was a truly hellish scene.

"This is…horrible," muttered Akuto as he watched from the stage.

"Come to think of it, an old artist painted hell like this," casually commented Fujiko after escaping onto the stage.

"I understand the situation now, but what should we do about it?" asked Junko as she looked back and forth between Akuto and Nozomi.

Akuto looked up at Nozomi with a truly troubled look.

"If we explain the situation…"

Nozomi was trembling because she had nowhere to escape to. It was unclear if she was still confused or if she had come to her senses, but he saw a pitiful and frightened girl there. The way she shrank down in fear made it hard to watch.

"It looks like she won't be able to explain the situation for us," he muttered quietly.

He then hesitantly looked down. The naked boys and girls had realized it was not so embarrassing when everyone was naked, so they had stopped fighting their embarrassment and were instead glaring angrily up at the stage. The red eyes of wild beasts glowed with the dark color of flesh in the background.

"How are we supposed to settle this?" asked Junko because she had no ideas.

"Well…" The darkness of resignation filled his eyes. "We can say it was my fault."

He stepped forward.

"Wait."

Junko tried to stop him, but there was nothing she could do.

But then Fujiko cut in.

"If the two of us demonstrate our love here, no one can touch us."

"Please spare me that."

Akuto immediately rejected the idea, but he could not find any solution other than silently letting the students pummel him. He was not currently powerful enough to stop them all without injuring them.

"Well, I've made up my mind. My body is sturdy, after all."

With that light comment, he stood before the ferocious students.

They rushed for the stage with so much force it looked like they were going to jump up onto it.

Akuto showed no fear and closed his eyes as he prepared himself for the onslaught.

But then a voice filled the gym.

"Wait!"

The voice could be heard over all the angry shouts.

Everyone stopped and turned toward the voice. It came from above where Keena flew in through a window near the roof. She held a megaphone in one hand and Korone was riding on her back. With the outside light shining behind her, she looked somehow divine.

"Keena..." muttered Akuto as he opened his eyes.

The students stopped moving and began muttering.

"I apologize for this. My control was lacking," she said. "I apologize for the trouble I have caused. I will officially provide you with new uniforms."

She continued speaking without pause and the students obediently listened.

But Akuto alone noticed that she would occasionally glance toward Korone's hand. The L'Isle-Adam likely held a cue card.

"But that alone is not enough of an apology. I would like to punish the demon king here!" declared Keena loudly.

A stir ran through the students.

"Eh? Punish?"

Akuto was surprised as well. It seemed she was controlling his power, but he had heard nothing about that ability.

Keena then floated down in front of him.

And she looked up at him angrily.

"A-chan!"

"Y-yes?" he mumbled.

"A-chan! The rice got all hard because of you!" she rebuked while pointing at him.

"Eh? Rice? Hard?"

He was confused and she called Korone over.

Korone approached and pulled a giant plastic bucket from her bag. It was the type of bucket that could be used as a trash can.

"There was extra rice being cooked in the dining hall. At this rate, it will need to be thrown out," explained Korone expressionlessly.

"It's because you cooked so much, A-chan! It's dried out and gotten hard, but you have to eat it all as punishment!"

Keena opened the bucket's lid and it was full of dry rice.

"Eh? Wait…"

Even Akuto backed away at that.

When Korone stuck a wooden spoon in the rice, it made a crunching noise.

"It's dry!" cried Akuto.

"I already told you it is! Now, eat all of it so it doesn't go to waste!"

Keena took the spoon from Korone, held down Akuto, and began stuffing hard rice in his mouth.

"S-stop…mgh! It's hard… My teeth!"

"Don't worry! You can eat it if you try! If I work really heard, I can eat this much! So if you put up with how hard it is, it won't be a problem!"

Despite how ridiculous her demand was, Keena climbed on top of Akuto and continued stuffing rice in his mouth.

"He has to eat hard rice?"

"Without recooking it?"

"And that much of it?"

"This has just gotten silly."

"Yeah, let's get out of here."

This pacified the angry students. As they watched on in a daze, Akuto was forced to swallow the dried rice.

Meanwhile, Korone stepped forward and opened her bag.

"Please form a line. Tell me your size and type and I will provide a replacement uniform."

The students obediently formed a line.

And thus, the commotion came to an end with only one major sacrifice.

All alone now, Akuto lay on his bed. Not even he was sure how he managed to consume all that rice, but the entire contents of the giant bucket had vanished into his stomach. He was now suffering a horrible stomachache in exchange.

"Ahh… This is nowhere near a peaceful life…" he lamented while staring up at the ceiling.

A face suddenly appeared in the edge of his vision. It was looking down at him as he lay on the bed.

"What is it?" he asked.

He received an immediate and unclear answer from Korone.

"I was just wondering if you were mad."

"Mad?" he asked.

For once, she paused before responding.

"You must know who brought about this situation. Even if some unexpected coincidences were involved."

"Yeah…" he spat out while shaking his head. "This is that girl's fault. And whether I'm mad or not is another issue. I am lamenting, though."

"In that case, I wish to make amends."

"Make amends?"

"Yes. I thought I would comfort you."

"You aren't teasing me again, are you?"

"Do you not trust me?"

She was expressionless, but there was a horribly sad ring to her voice.

"Th-that isn't what I said."

He grew a bit flustered.

"Good."

She smiled kindly at him. If his memory was accurate, this was the second time he had seen her smile.

She then leaned over him.

"You said you weren't teasing me, so don't try to do anything indecent," he said hesitantly.

"Do not worry. I am merely doing what I think you would want me to do. I simply wish to comfort you. Fortunately, I was given an appearance that is pleasing to humans, so I thought I would lie next to you and sing a love song."

She slipped into his bed and into his arms.

"…Hey."

"You won't let me do this?"

She looked up at him with upturned eyes.

Seeing her eyes shine like precious jewels, he wrapped an arm around her shoulders without thinking.

"Um…I…didn't say that…"

"Do you have an erection?"

"Eh?"

"I asked if you have an erection."

Akuto looked back at her face.

She was staring at him with her usual expressionless look.

"You tricked me again, didn't you?"

The corner of Korone's mouth rose in a grin.

"I should tell the other girls that they need to deceive you like this. Now, time to check if you have an erection."

"Don't!" he shouted while brushing away her outstretched hand.

While still lying next to him, she spoke in her usual tone of voice.

"Would you really not be angry if I did something like this again?"

Akuto looked her in the eye, saw she did not seem to be putting on an odd act this time, and sighed in resignation.

"As long as no one is harmed and you make sure it helps Keena. But please keep it to a minimum."

"As you wish," she agreed.

"Okay then."

He closed his eyes.

"Um…"

"Hm?"

He opened his eyes when she spoke again.

"I notice you did not force me out of the bed," she said teasingly.

"I just wanted to get to sleep because my stomach hurts!"

"I will include in my records that boys use that excuse. Now, you will be forced to eat more dried rice if the empress sees us like this, so I will return to my shelf."

She got up from the bed.

"Come to think of it, I haven't seen Keena since that."

"She said she would return the bucket to the dining hall. I wonder what happened."

"Waaaahh! It's all sticky and I can't get out! Help me, A-chan, Korone-chan!"

Keena shouted while stuck to the birdlime on the wall of the school building's second floor.

"I was only trying to go to the rice sale I learned about when I slipped on a banana peel, but when I picked up the bag of rice, a metal washtub fell on me, I staggered over onto a trampoline, and was launched up here where I stuck!"

She was crying.

But Nozomi, the one who had laid the trap, was currently trembling inside a futon in the janitorial room.

"This is dangerous! This academy is dangerous!"

In the end, Keena was not rescued until about an hour later.

Chapter 2: What if We Made a Copy Human?

A dark room was filled with strange devices. It contained glowing panels and monitors displaying graphs. The sound of cooling fans never ceased.

In the center of that room, a girl was operating an electric screwdriver attached to the end of a mechanical arm. She seemed indifferent about her appearance because she wore plain white clothes and her short hair was unkempt. She had goggles on her forehead and oil stains on her cheeks.

Her name was Kita Yoshie. Her talent in virtual alternate dimension research had dragged her into a conspiracy which had ultimately put her on Akuto's side of the demon king war. She was now working for the government once more, but she spent most of her time lost in her own interests and inventions. Even on weekdays, she could be found working in this storehouse rented from Constant Magic Academy.

"Heh heh heh. I've finally finished it."

She looked up with a grin.

A doll lay before her.

The "doll" was a L'Isle-Adam with top-class artificial intelligence. They were often used for simple work and often did not have humanoid appearances. This doll had a smooth surface with almost no unevenness. It looked a lot like a drawing doll or a base form that would be fleshed out later. It was lying on a large work bench.

Yoshie reached for a round switch at the center of its face where a nose would go, but she hesitated to press it.

"Mnn. Was this an invention of god or the devil? Will I regret calling this detestable existence back from the deep darkness?"

She had a way of speaking in a roundabout manner. To be blunt, she was heavily obsessed with video games.

"Boss, I see you are speaking in an embarrassing way again."

She heard a sudden voice from behind her.

A small L'Isle-Adam entered the room.

Despite what she had said to Yoshie, she spoke in a strange old-fashioned manner. And her appearance was no better: she was dressed like a samurai, her ponytail was long enough to reach her feet, and the sword on her back was twice her height.

Her name was Keisu. She had been created to seal the original demon king, but with that role complete, she spent her time helping Yoshie.

"Hm? Why are you here?"

Yoshie turned around.

"Why would you ask that? You are the one that called in a guest."

Keisu pointed behind her.

"Oh, that's right."

Yoshie picked a cleaner up from the ground, sprayed some on her hands, wiped it off with a hand towel, and used a leg to push a chair out toward the guest.

"You look busy."

Akuto walked into the room and casually slid into the chair as if meeting an old friend. Yoshie's personality was not very feminine and she enjoyed topics that had little to do with the real world, so he acted without reservation around her.

"I was busy, but I just finished."

Yoshie stood next to him and rested her elbows on the table.

"You mean that doll? Or is it a L'Isle-Adam?"

He indicated the work bench with his chin.

"It's a doll, but it's a pretty dangerous one."

She gave a proud smile.

"Dangerous? Is it illegal?"

"You can't call it illegal when no laws have been made about it," she said confidently. "In other words, it goes beyond what existing laws have made a decision on."

"But you're still sure it's dangerous?" he asked.

She nodded.

"That's why I called you. Oh, but I don't mean it might explode or go on a rampage. I wanted to get your opinion."

"My opinion?"

"Yeah. Basically, this is a doll that copies someone's personality."

She pointed her thumb at the smooth doll.

"It copies someone's personality? So it's something like necromancy?"

His eyes opened wide.

"It's not quite the same. Necromancy checks the data logs saved by the gods, but this copies the personality to a virtual alternate dimension."

Akuto leaned forward in interest.

"I see. It is true our physical bodies sometimes remained here while we were sent to a virtual alternate dimension."

"Yes. I made a robot that uses that to copy a personality. I was originally thinking about where a human's soul is."

"Since that led to making this, does it mean the soul actually exists and it can be copied?"

"Yes. It's kind of weird, but just as the gods insist, there is a way to take the human soul to another dimension and reproduce it there. That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"It does sound like something I should keep in mind."

He nodded with a serious expression.

"But the real question for today is what to do with this thing."

Yoshie shrugged with a troubled look.

"What do you mean?" asked Akuto.

She walked back to the work bench and beckoned him over.

"Come over and take a look."

"It has a pretty large build."

He looked down at the doll lying there.

Yoshie placed a hand on top of it and spoke.

"Making it is good and all, but I realized that it can be misused like crazy. It looks smooth now, but it creates the outer appearance of whoever presses the button on its nose here. It covers itself in the same kind of solidified mana that Hattori-kun's copies use."

"So you would have two of the same person? That could get strange."

"Yeah, that's why I added a safety device into the copied personality. It's made to know it's a fake and to not cause any harm to people."

"I'm interested, but you should destroy it after one test given the possibility for misuse," he said while folding his arms.

Yoshie nodded.

"I had a feeling you would say that. I just wanted a push in the right direction. Well, that and some data."

"Some data?" he asked.

Yoshie grabbed his hand and pressed the doll's nose with it.

"Wait!" he cried out in surprise.

With a low hum, the doll's surface began to glow and mana condensed around it.

"Sorry, sorry. I thought I would test it on you. But don't worry. This won't be too big a deal."

She clasped her hands together as she apologized.

"But…are you sure this will be okay?"

He looked worriedly down at the doll.

"Of course, of course."

She waved her hand irresponsibly.

Meanwhile, the mana finished condensing and the light vanished.

An exact copy of Akuto now lay on the work bench.

"Wah!" he cried out in shock.

"Looking that surprised is a lot like insulting yourself," said the second Akuto as he sat up.

"That does sound like something I would say."

Akuto's eyes opened wide.

"That's because I'm made to be exactly the same," said the second Akuto. "Even though I'm aware of it, being a fake isn't the best feeling. A quick experiment is fine, but if you don't have a specific role for me, I'd like you to erase this copy as soon as possible. I don't particularly want to talk with myself."

"Agreed. Then again, I suppose it makes sense I would agree with you."

"Exactly. You just need a few minutes to gather data, right?"

Yoshie smiled as she responded to the two Akutos.

"Just chat for about an hour. But having two of the same personality together is pretty interesting."

"I don't find it interesting."

"Naturally, neither do I."

"Now, then," said Yoshie. "I would prefer if you did not simply speak with yourself."

"Yes. I would prefer to speak with you than with myself. And we haven't had many chances to have a nice conversation."

"I would like some suggestions on how to act from now on. Keena just acts too freely."

"I see you have already learned how to split up your role and speak one after the other. But remember that there's only one of me. I'm going to busy for just a one-on-one conversation.

Yoshie laughed.

"N-now this is interesting."

A black shadow lurked in the entrance to the storehouse.

It was Nozomi the natural born janitor. She wore a maid uniform around her small body and her forehead glittered as she peered into the storehouse.

She had ended up eavesdropping while performing her janitor job. She had been unable to resist looking inside and there she had witnessed the two Akutos.

"Based on the conversation beforehand, does it transform into whoever presses the button?"

She then began making strange calculations in her head once again. She did not reach too farfetched a conclusion, but her plan was plenty selfish.

"I know! I'll borrow that doll, make a copy of the empress, and have her do what I say! And then I'll become the empress. It's perfect!"

Her talent as a janitor then fully showed itself. She ran quickly over to the control panel outside the storehouse, rang the emergency alarm, and cut the power.

"Wah."

"The lights have gone out."

"This isn't right. The emergency power isn't coming on. Let's head out."

The three people inside spoke.

Hearing them, Nozomi ran back to the entrance, snatched the fire extinguisher, and sprayed it the instant the three exited.

"Wah!"

"Hyah!"

The color white filled the area and the three…no, just two let out screams.

She did not overlook that only one was unfazed.

—The doll must not have been concerned about the fire extinguisher!

After making a (for her) wonderful deduction, she grabbed the arm of the unfazed one.

"This way!"

She tugged on the doll's arm and ran.

"Ah. Are you sure?"

The doll had Akuto's personality, so it obediently followed her lead.

She then used all her ability as a janitor to keep the real Akuto and Yoshie from following. She ran down a back way while tugging on the doll Akuto's hand. In only her short time there, she had perfectly memorized the confusing structure of the school.

"Wait!"

"Where are you going!?"

Akuto and Yoshie's voices quickly grew distant behind them. There were passageways even the students were not aware of, so it was not difficult for Nozomi to escape.

"Heh heh heh. This should be far enough."

While hiding in the space behind a maintenance panel, she turned toward the doll.

"So what do you want?"

The doll had the exact personality and appearance of Akuto, so he approached Nozomi more kindly than necessary after she dragged him here.

"W-w-well, th-the thing about that is…"

She hesitated to speak.

Unsurprisingly, she had almost no experience in speaking with boys. Having Akuto so close to her in this small space was proving too much for her.

"C-could you move a little farther away?"

"Sorry, but I think that has more to do with you bringing me into this small area. ...Excuse me a moment. This might help."

He grabbed her waist with both hands, lifted her up, and set her down on a panel just a bit higher than his chest.

"Hyaah!"

She let out a surprised shriek, but once he set her down and she found a fair amount of space around her, she settled down. But this put his face quite nearby.

"U-u-umm…"

She blushed and shook her hands around.

But he placed a hand on her head as if being affectionate to a child.

"So will you tell me why you did that?"

"I-I… I'm not a child, y'know. I have a job!"

"My apologies. You just looked quite young. Actually, that might be rude too."

"I'm probably older than you."

She puffed out her cheeks.

"Then I apologize again. Anyway, I assume you had a good reason for doing what you did."

Akuto fixed his sitting position.

"W-well… I actually wanted to use your power to create a copy of the empress."

When she gave an honest answer, the look in his eyes changed.

"I think you know you shouldn't do that," he said seriously.

He then forcibly held down her shoulders.

"Wait. What are you doing?"

"You have to ask? Let's get back to where I should be. And…"

"Hyah! No! I'll scream."

"I would prefer to avoid misunderstandings, but if someone comes by, I just have to hand you over to them."

"Gyaaah! Noooo!"

She frantically flailed her arms and legs.

"Stop struggling so mu- Ah!"

After a quick shout, Akuto stopped moving.

Nozomi's hand had hit him directly on the nose.

"Hyaaaah! …Oh, right. The switch."

She gave a sigh of relief once she realized Akuto had stopped moving.

"But what will happen now that I hit the switch?"

"Not good. That girl was the one from the other day."

Akuto shook his head.

"Is she trouble?" asked Yoshie.

"Yes, she is," he answered. "You probably didn't notice, but she caused a major incident the other day. The problem seems to lie in her personality. I think she has overly abundant imagination and drive, but she does not how to handle real situations."

"That does sound bad." She checked the storehouse's panel and then shook her head. "There's nothing wrong with the storehouse. This really isn't good. It means she was after the doll. She really isn't a good person."

"No. She might be planning to misuse it in some way. She seems to want to become empress, so she might try to copy Keena."

Yoshie let out a sigh when she heard that.

"Then we should be fine."

"Why?"

"It isn't that easy to misuse. While it won't harm humans, it won't necessarily obey them either. And even if she wants to use the position of empress, this is Keena we're talking about. That won't get very far."

"Hm. I guess you're right," he agreed. "And the current copy is of my personality, so nothing should happen."

"Heh heh. Don't be so sure. It looks like you still don't know how troublesome your own personality can be."

Yoshie laughed lightly and Akuto looked confused.

"Eh?"

"Just talking to myself. But there is one problem. One part is weak to impacts. If you press the switch too hard, it can cause a malfunction."

"A malfunction?"

Yoshie looked worried, but she shook her head.

"It's nothing to worry about. Normally, it will just copy whoever pressed the nose and the previous personality is erased. But when too much of an impact is applied to the nose and it malfunctions, there is a possibility of the personalities mixing together. Outside of a truly terrible combination, that would merely create a slightly twisted personality."

"A truly terrible combination? You mean like a personality with overly abundant imagination and drive but with an inability to handle real situations combining with a personality with a great ability to handle real situations but too much sense to act on it?"

Yoshie smiled.

"Yeah, just like that." And then her expression froze over. "That would be the Sasahara Nozomi girl and you, wouldn't it?"

"H-huh? If it can't move, that means I can escape, right?"

Nozomi tried to jump down from the panel, but strength returned to Akuto's hands holding her shoulders.

"Hyah!"

When she shouted out, Akuto looked up and smiled at her.

"You need not escape. Don't worry. I understand now."

"U-understand? Understand what?"

Nozomi trembled at the unusual atmosphere.

But he merely whispered gently to her.

"I will steal the imperial throne. All I need to do is seduce Keena and I will be emperor."

"Wait! You can't do that. I need to become empress!"

"My becoming emperor is just as good. After all, I will treat you well. Once I sit on the throne, you can sit by my side."

"How can you say that?'

"Because I am you," said Akuto.

Nozomi then figured out what was happening.

"So that's it! The personalities mixed together!"

"Exactly. And now that you understand, just leave it all to me."

He smiled at her again, but she shook her head.

"Y-you can't. I want to be empress…"

She insisted on resisting, but Akuto suddenly pressed his fingers against her mouth.

"Such a hopeless girl. I need you to remain silent."

"Mh…mh…mgh…"

She continued to shake her head.

Akuto grinned and slid his other hand from her shoulder to her neck. The sensation made her jump.

"Ee!"

"I will make certain you cannot resist, little kitten."

With a chuckle, Akuto moved his fingers down from her neck and brought his head in toward her.

"Wfwaaaaaaahhhh…"

She let out a scream and her entire body trembled.

"Hm? She's collapsed," said Yoshie when she found Nozomi.

"Then it did something to her?" asked Akuto in surprise. "I thought it wasn't supposed to harm people."

The two of them had found her after beginning a search.

"She's breathing."

Akuto ran over and held her up.

"She's just unconscious."

Yoshie peered at her face.

Nozomi's face was flushed and she was breathing heavily.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Akuto shook her.

"N-nnnn…"

She blinked several times and suddenly screamed when she saw him.

"Nooooo! Stop! Oh, but don't stop!"

She clung to Akuto and began panting even more heavily. It was so sudden that Akuto instinctually pulled away.

"Wait! What are you doing?"

But as if in a trance, she pursued him and pressed up against his body.

"Nyaaaaah! Have your way with meeee!"

"Waaaah! Please spare me!"

He forcibly ripped her from him and held her in one hand by the nape of the neck. Only once she was dangling down like that did she come back to her senses. Her struggling came to a sudden stop and she looked embarrassed.

"Ah… Are you the real one?"

"Yes. I am not the doll you stole. Also…what happened?"

Akuto was clearly reluctant to ask.

She blushed and shook her head.

"N-nothing happened. Y-yes, he just suddenly karate chopped me on the neck!"

As she spoke, she began fixing her disheveled maid uniform.

Akuto turned toward Yoshie with a troubled look.

Yoshie shook her head while blushing.

"Don't look at me. But…um, I think I know what happened here."

"No, I just wanted to say I wouldn't do that," he explained.

"Don't say anything to me. This is embarrassing for me as well."

Yoshie gave an embarrassed bitter smile, but her expression grew serious as she touched her goggles and turned toward Nozomi.

"Anyway, the doll escaped I assume? Please don't tell me he said he wanted to became the emperor."

A look of shock filled Nozomi's face.

"H-how did you know?"

"I knew it…"

Akuto and Nozomi exchanged a glance.

"This mixture of personalities is bad news. But he can't harm humans, so this can't be too bad, right?"

Akuto tried to stay positive, but Yoshie immediately shook her head.

"Knowing you, you probably don't have a clue, but you can get girls to do what you say by doing that to them."

Yoshie pointed at Nozomi rather than speak in any more detail.

"I can get girls to do what I say? Eh? Really?"

Akuto's eyes opened wide in surprise.

"Yes…well…it depends on the girl… At the very least, it should work with a girl who doesn't hate you. Anyway, the worst part is that the doll has a girl's personality as well, so it knows the ideal way to…um…approach a girl."

Yoshie was usually quite candid, but she hesitated to speak here.

"Um, so… How should I put this? Does that give you any idea where the doll is?" asked Akuto as he let Nozomi down.

"I-I don't know! Wahhhhhhh!"

As soon as she was freed, Nozomi ran off with the speed of a frightened animal.

"Ah, she escaped again."

Akuto scratched at his head in annoyance.

"Capturing the doll is more important," urged Yoshie.

"How do we do that?"

"Our only choice is to check with all the girls you would have the easiest time seducing."

"Seducing? What are you talking about?"

Akuto was not sure what to say and Yoshie merely sighed.

"Just follow my instructions. First, let's locate them telepathically. Um, let's start with Fujiko-kun."

She pulled out her terminal and began searching for the proper number.

Etou Fujiko was at a café managing the girls' dorm's management data, but she looked over to her student handbook when the telepathic call light flashed.

But she rejected the call just before answering it.

"Etou-san."

After all, Akuto had called out to her. The telepathic call had been from Yoshie and it was obvious who took precedence there.

"What is it, Akuto-sama?"

She smiled at him and he gave a slightly mischievous smile in return.

"I'd like to speak in private."

"Oh? It is not often that you make an invitation like that."

With her eyes sparkling, she stood up and took his hand while leaving her café cup behind.

He held her hand back and red tinged her cheeks.

"Shall we go for a walk?"

"No, I want to be alone with you."

"My! Then we can go to my underground room! What is with you all of a sudden? I am so happy!"

She clung to his arm.

"I have something important to discuss with you," he said the instant they entered her underground room.

"Anything you wish to discuss is important to me," she said while snuggling up against his arm.

"That's good to hear. So… It seems there is a copy of me walking around."

With her still clinging to him, he sat on the velvet sofa. She leaned on his shoulder and looked up at him.

"A copy?"

"Yes. Yoshie-san created a doll that can copy a person's personality and appearance."

"My!"

Fujiko's mouth opened in surprise.

Akuto looked back at her with a serious expression.

"Anyway, it malfunctioned and is now quite dangerous. It seems to be after the imperial throne."

"The imperial throne?"

Despite repeating him, she did not seem to really be listening. She was simply looking up at him while blushing.

"Yes. It seems to want to use Keena to kill me and rule the world while using Keena as a puppet. That's why I want you to prove that I am me."

"Prove that you are you?"

She looked up at him absentmindedly.

"Yes. Please give me some kind of accessory. When I meet my copy, I can use that as a sign that I am the real one."

After saying that, Akuto traced his hand across her cheek.

A twitch ran through her back as he did.

"Ahn. In that case, how about a kiss mark? I could leave them all over. Then we would be one removed shirt away from using the evidence of our love to prove who is the real one. Wouldn't that be amazing?"

Fujiko brought her lips toward his neck.

"That sounds great."

She laughed and moved his hand from her cheek, to her hair, and to her head.

"And if I help, I would get a reward, wouldn't I?"

She drew back as if ticklish and brought her face in close to his.

"Of course. I was just thinking about kissing you. The rest will have to wait until after I destroy the fake."

He drew in the hand behind her head to bring her lips in closer.

But…

"Oh? What kind of a reward would that be? I said I would give a kiss to prove who is the real Akuto-sama. I am not about to kiss a fake."

She smiled cruelly and tore herself from the doll Akuto.

The doll Akuto looked confused.

"What? Why would you think I am the fake?"

"Oh? I could tell right away. It is an issue of love."

"Love?"

Fujiko crossed her arms confidently and looked down on the doll Akuto with contempt.

"Simply put, I can just tell. After all, there is something different about you. As if someone else is mixed in. You reek of the kind of ideal boy a timid girl would think up."

"Kh…"

The doll Akuto bit his lip.

"Based on what you said, I assume you truly are after the imperial throne. And if you are trying this, I can also assume you cannot harm humans just like all the other L'Isle-Adams. Am I wrong?"

She spoke with a challenge in her voice and he could only shake his head regretfully.

"That's exactly right. What are you going to do? Are you going to hand me over to the authorities?"

"Hm. That is a good question. It was quite exciting until I realized you were a fake. Perhaps I should simply forgive you."

"Eh? You'll forgive me?"

"Yes. What you are planning sounds quite enjoyable. You are trying to 'convince' girls like that until you have won over Keena, aren't you? I want to see you try that."

She laughed in amusement.

The doll Akuto was clearly confused, but she continued on.

"If any of the others cannot tell you from the real Akuto-sama, it will prove that I love him more deeply than them. And any girl who you do seduce will be awkward around him afterwards. That would be most welcome. Go seduce Hattori Junko and Soga Keena."

She then transferred Junko and Keena's numbers into a telepathic communicator that did not use magic and handed it to him.

"You do not have a registered communicator, do you? Use this. I think you will fail in the end, but do your best."

The doll Akuto accepted the communicator with a complicated expression and waved at her.

"That's where you're wrong. I'll make this work until the very end."

Left all lone, Fujiko sighed.

"I doubt it will work out, so perhaps I should have told him to give it up. It can take some doing, but there are countless ways of telling a doll from a human. Perhaps he has some reason for trying so desperately hard."

Junko was surprised to receive a telepathic call from an unregistered number. Those were fairly rare. She was doubly surprised when she answered it and it was from Akuto.

"What is it? Don't you have your own communicator?"

<It was stolen.>

"Stolen?"

<Yes. I want to meet and speak with you as soon as possible.>

"Understood. Where should I go?"

<Somewhere no one else will go. Sorry, but could you go to the mountain behind the school?>

"Understood."

After ending the call, Junko grew suspicious.

"I should probably be on my guard."

Calling her out like this was a little odd for Akuto. And then he had asked her to go to the mountain. It could easily be a trap.

She gripped her sword and approached the arranged spot while making a wide circle around the mountain area. But despite being so cautious, she did not spot any kind of trap.

"Sorry about the wait."

While still cautious, she approached Akuto.

"Don't worry about it. More importantly, things have gotten very bad."

He suddenly grabbed her right hand with both hands.

"Wha-…? Why are you holding my hand…?"

She turned her head and mumbled.

But he stared straight at her.

"Sorry. I was just worried. The thing is, a copy of me is walking around."

"A copy?"

She looked back at him in surprise.

"Yes. Kita-san created a doll that can copy people and it is trying to throw me out."

It did not look like he was lying, but something bothered her.

"So that's why your handbook was stolen. But wait…"

"I know it's hard to believe, but it's difficult to prove that I am the real one. Also, Etou-san has already fallen for the lies of the fake."

"Etou-san has?"

"Yes. She claims to love me, but she can't tell the real me from a fake. It really is horrible. You wouldn't do that, would you?"

Akuto brought his clasped hands up to his face and begged her.

"Uuh… Wait just a second."

She drew her head back a bit.

She had initially felt something off about this Akuto, but seeds of something like antagonism entered her heart when she heard that Fujiko had been deceived by the fake. If she could distinguish the real one from the fake, it would mean her feelings for him were greater.

"Don't worry. Trust me. If you see two of me and need to know which one is real, you only have to believe the one Etou-san says is fake."

He continued to press her for an answer.

"A-again… Wait a second."

She shook her head reluctantly and stepped back.

But he did not let go of her hand and stepped forward.

"Do you not like me?"

"I-I did not say that."

"You're afraid, aren't you? Don't worry. You can leave everything to me."

"I said that is not it… You are acting weird."

"Weird? Are you doubting me? In that case, I will have to prove that I am the real one."

He let go of her hand, grabbed her chin between his thumb and forefinger, and lifted her head.

"W-wait… What do you mean 'prove'?"

Even her ears blushed red and tension filled her voice.

"Only the real me can satisfy you."

He brought his face in towards hers.

"Y-you idiot… Stop…"

She brushed his fingers from her chin and lowered her head.

"You don't want to?" he whispered.

"Th-that is not the issue."

"Then you are merely afraid, little kitten. Don't worry. Just leave it to me."

He placed his hand on her head, caressed her hair, and covered her face with her hair.

"Ah…"

She felt her spine tremble and she raised her head.

"Now, be mine."

He slowly brought his face in towards her.

"Ee… I already said…um…"

She shook her head back and forth but finally closed her eyes and opened her lips slightly.

"Yes, just like that…"

And he approached those lips.

"I-I can't!"

She shoved him away.

He staggered backwards and fell to the ground.

"You don't believe me?" he asked in confusion.

She intensely shook her head.

"That is not it! It isn't… But there really is something strange about you today. You might be the fake."

"You can't mean that…"

"N-no. Do not make that face. But the boy I know would not do something like this just to get someone to trust him. That is what I mean."

She stated all that while breathing erratically as if in pain.

Akuto stood up and shook his head in disappointment.

"In that case, I understand. But it isn't easy proving that I'm the real one. I guess I have to ask another girl."

Those words brought a painful sensation to Junko's heart.

"A-another girl? Do not say it like that. It sounds like you are toying with my heart. Saying that will…um…hurt me."

"I'm aware doing that is wrong, but I'm worried I will disappear if I can't prove that I'm the real one."

"I-I understand… But can't you just ask Korone? We might have to use special equipment to tell if you are a doll, but she should be able to tell right away."

Akuto opened his eyes in surprise.

"Korone could tell? I guess you're right. I hadn't thought about that."

"As long as you understand now. Just do not say anything more about having another girl trust you."

She looked away from him.

"I will always trust in you. And I will make sure I am ready by the next time we meet alone like this…" Junko looked back at him with the eyes of a maiden. "We can continue this then. …He's gone!?"

Akuto had already vanished, leaving only the unique thick air of the mountain.

"Wh-what is with him!? I do not care if that was the real one or not! The next time we meet, I am letting him have it!"

She stomped on the ground in anger.

"I'm not sure what's going on, but it seems the demon king is seducing girls, one after another."

"Apparently a fake has appeared and some major commotion is coming, so he wants us to join his side when that happens."

"I heard the one the empress says is real is real, so we should help that one."

"What is he trying to do? …More importantly, has he successfully seduced any of the girls?"

"From what I hear, it's going really well. Most of them are completely falling for him."

"Does nothing else matter to a girl as long as he's strong!? And doesn't he already have Etou-san and a ton of other girls!?"

"He's apparently seducing more nonetheless. He's even won over some who already had boyfriends."

"But won't the guy attack him for that even if he's the demon king?"

"Yes. That's why he keeps seducing the girl, getting punched by the guy, and then running away."

"That's horrible. What is he trying to do?"

"Who knows. Last I heard, he was on his way to where Korone-chan and the empress are."

A stir had run through the school. Everyone knew Akuto was on a rampage and both girls and boys were either following him around or running away from him.

When he heard what was happening, Akuto gave a troubled look to Yoshie.

"What should we do?"

"Even if Nozomi's personality has messed it up quite a bit, this is still partially your own fault. You could easily seduce all these girls if you tried."

"I didn't choose to be born that way."

"Don't get mad. Anyway, where is Keena? We need to hurry up and protect her."

Yoshie sat in a chair and crossed her arms and legs. They were back in the storehouse/laboratory. They had split up to search for the doll, but that had failed, so they were back here to put together a plan.

"Can't you detect her location?" he asked.

Everyone had their own unique mana, so it was not hard to trace an individual.

"No, not without extremely high access rights. I could hack in and do it, but I don't want to risk it. This school has been under strict observation ever since the empress came here."

"Then what about Korone rather than a human? Also, she should be able to tell which one is the fake. And if we knew she was with Keena, we could stop worrying."

"It is true she would be able to detect the fake. It wasn't exactly made to hide that it's a doll."

"Well, it was an experimental model. I just wish you hadn't had it copy me."

"Yeah, about that…"

Yoshie rotated her chair 180 degrees, uncrossed her legs, spread them, placed her hands between her legs to lean forward, and grinned.

"To be honest, I had it copy your personality so I could try to seduce it while alone with it I wanted to see how it would react."

"Eh?"

Akuto was dumbfounded.

She kicked off the ground to move the chair toward him and looked up at him from below.

"It shouldn't be that surprising. Girls get embarrassed about things, you know? I thought I could practice on it rather than trying it out for real. And part of me hoped I would be satisfied with just practicing."

"You mean…"

"I wanted to try some exciting things with someone who looked just like you."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and he panicked.

"Wait. This is hardly the time for this. If we don't find Korone, Keena is in trouble."

"That's the problem right there. You're so attached to Soga-kun, so sometimes I think some unfair things. Like how nice it would feel to keep you all for myself."

She boldly drew his head in close and placed his forehead against hers.

"I-I didn't think you felt that way…"

There was clear confusion in his voice.

"That's because you're dense. When I talk about video games, society, or the existence of the soul, you forget I'm a girl and have a completely serious discussion with me. How could I not fall for someone like that?"

She looked into his eyes with her own shimmering eyes.

"A-again… This really isn't the time…"

"I am doing this because it is the perfect time. I actually know exactly where Korone is. She is not with Soga-kun, so Soga-kun might be in trouble."

She actually gave a cruel look for once.

"What!? Please let go. I have to go!"

"No. If Soga-kun falls for you, I'll be lonely. So can't you make me feel wonderful just for a little bit?"

"That's why you're doing this…?"

"Yes. I know it's selfish. But…I'm a girl too."

Yoshie gathered strength in the arms wrapped around Akuto's neck and stood up.

And then…

Meanwhile, Keena was in the imperial reception room that had been specially installed recently. Other than the rice bin, it was a perfectly normal room.

She had been napping there, but she opened her eyes to a sudden visitor.

"Oh, A-chan. What is it? Want to join me?"

"That might be nice, but it is hardly the time. A copy of me is after you."

He crouched down in front of Keena as she lay carelessly on the sofa.

"Hm, that's not good," she said sleepily.

"Could you take this more seriously? My copy hopes to win you over and rule using your power."

He spoke seriously, but Keena did not seem to have completely woken up.

"What do you mean by win me over?"

"He will get you to accept him and… To put it simply, he will stay by your side and use your power as empress."

"Oh, having you by my side would be nice. A-chan, stay with me forever."

She nodded blankly before embracing Akuto and pulling him onto the sofa.

"W-wait," he said embarrassedly.

"We're just going to sleep. Dozing off feels really good. And dozing off while holding someone in your arms is the best."

She nestled up against his cheek.

"This is exactly what I meant by winning you over, so stop," he said worriedly. "What if I were the fake?"

"Don't worry. I haven't checked, but I know you're real. I could feel it when I pressed my cheek against you. Good night."

Keena kissed his cheek with a soft expression.

"Ah… I told you to stop. Just to be sure, you know I'm the real one, right?" he asked.

"Yeah. Real or fake, you're A-chan. No matter what happens, I'll be on your side. If someone says you're a fake, I'll tell them they're wrong."

Keena was half asleep as she spoke.

Akuto smiled a bit.

"Honestly, there's no helping you… But I'm glad to hear that."

Yoshie hit the switch on the back of the doll Akuto's head where it was hidden by his hair.

The doll Akuto collapsed limply and the surface mana scattered, leaving only the original smooth doll.

"I do feel bad about being selfish, but I'd be too embarrassed to tell the real one."

She called Keisu back into the room and had her take care of the collapsed doll.

"And I know you didn't want to disappear," she said to the doll. "You may have been a copy, but you had a soul, so you would have no purpose without a meaning to your birth. That's probably why you were so desperate. You had to have known your identity would be discovered even if you temporarily won over the empress. …I really am sorry I did this for such a selfish reason. I need to be more honest."

"Boss, why is Akuto-dono collapsed here?"

Keisu looked up at her questioningly.

"That's because this is a doll."

"I know that, but I could have sworn this was the real one."

"I was pretty sure the real one would be worried enough to head for Keena while out looking for the doll, so I decided to contact the doll myself. He must have been worried once he realized Korone could tell he was the fake. I immediately realized it, but I decided to trick him in order to switch him off."

"I see. But it sounded like you were talking about something complicated."

Yoshie shook her head.

"You don't have to understand. I just felt I needed to apologize to him about something. Oh, but I also need to apologize to the real one."

She scratched at her head.

"Why?"

"Because I indirectly made the school hate him even more."

Just as she was saying that, Akuto was leaving the reception room. He had already received word that the doll had been deactivated and he had set Keena to sleep.

He was feeling oddly exhilarated, but that proved to be a mistake. As he walked casually down the hall, he ended up in a crowd of students and finally noticed the strange atmosphere surrounding the entire student body.

"Um, did this cause a lot of problems by any chance?"

What happened next was much too gruesome to write here.

Chapter 3: The Three Officers' Enjoyable Day Off

The three officers of the student council were always busy. It was not that President Lily Shiraishi was irresponsible. She simply felt she could ignore the more formal aspects as long as she did the bare minimum of what was needed, so the odd jobs were always left to the vice president, treasurer and secretary.

"I don't have enough tomato juice, arinsu," said Ootake Michie as she stared at a mana screen.

She always had white skin, red eyes, and an unhealthy appearance, but she currently looked especially sickly.

"There's some tomato juice on your desk, gya," said Kamiyama Kanna while pointing to Michie's desk.

She had a boyish or even wild appearance, but with her hair disheveled and the exhausted look on her face, she went beyond wild and looked more like a castaway. Her mana screen also displayed a large amount of data.

"The tomato juice you bought doesn't have any salt, arinsu!"

Michie pounded on the desk and the can of tomato juice with a straw in it bounced up a bit.

Kanna grimaced in annoyance.

"You can't put salt in tomato juice, gya. It has to be unsalted, gya. Natural is best, gya."

"Can't you do something about that naturalism of yours, arinsu? When I'm tired, I want salt. I won't give that up, arinsu."

"How about you let your sweat dry and lick up that, gya?"

"You must really want me to pluck out all of your hair, arinsu."

Michie and Kanna stopped moving as they glared at each other.

Having noticed the situation's downward spiral, the third member spoke up.

"Guga."

She was a tall, bespectacled L'Isle-Adam with long black hair. Like many L'Isle-Adams, she gave a cool impression and her expression rarely changed. However, there was something in her tone that left no room for argument.

Michie and Kanna both leaned back in their chairs.

"I suppose it is my fault for being so exhausted, arinsu."

"And I realize I'm being irritable, gya."

"Guga, guuga, guga, guga," continued the L'Isle-Adam whose name was Arnoul.

Michie smiled in amusement. She and Kanna could understand what she said.

"I see. You're right, arinsu. We do need to get out sometimes, arinsu."

"Come to think of it, we haven't had a day off in a while, gya."

"That's because of what happened during the Zero War, arinsu. We haven't gotten any rest since then, arinsu."

"We've been busy cleaning up even though we were injured too, gya. The president is so cold-hearted, gya."

"Then how about we cut loose for once, arinsu?"

"Sounds great, gya!"

Michie and Kanna were excited.

"Guga."

"Arnoul, don't worry about paying for anything, gya. This can count as an apology for punching you while you were being controlled by Zero, gya."

Kanna beat her chest proudly and Michie looked over with admiration.

"You sure are generous, arinsu."

"No, I mean the two of us will pay for her, gya."

"Really? Well, fine. If it's for Arnoul, arinsu."

Michie looked surprised at first, but she quickly grinned.

Kanna smiled as well, but her expression soon grew serious.

"But we still have to worry about the president, gya."

"She'll never allow us a day off, arinsu."

"Guga."

They all crossed their arms in thought, but they could not find anything to say. Finally, Kanna shook her head.

"Thinking about it isn't going to help, gya!"

"There's just no way to get a day off out of her, arinsu."

Michie also spread her arms in defeat, but Arnoul opened her mouth to suggest something.

"Guga, guga."

As if influenced by those words, a glint entered Kanna's eyes.

"We just have to make a run for it, gya."

Michie nodded with a serious expression.

"The president is dealing with a call. This is our chance, arinsu."

Michie and Kana exchanged a grin. They kicked away their chairs simultaneously, turned around, and rushed for the door. As the door burst open, they slid out into the hallway and ran. Arnoul walked calmly, yet somehow matched the other two's speed.

But they all came to a stop when a voice called out from behind them.

"Hey, perfect timing. I just got an odd call."

They did not need to turn around to know the voice belonged to Lily Shiraishi.

They began moving once more and quickly dashed forward.

"…Hey, wait! Where the hell do you think you're going!?"

Lily's arm extended, but those three were used to it. They quickly turned a corner and escaped Lily's pursuit.

Lily was left behind, not knowing what happened.

"What's with them? …Dammit, they're ditching their duties, aren't they? When they get back, I'll torture them with my grandmother's soy sauce rice crackers until they wish they were dead."

She grimaced.

"But what was with that request? 'A L'Isle-Adam servant at my house headed toward the academy while saying she would defeat the demon king'?"

She pulled out her student handbook and searched for who she wanted to call telepathically.

"I doubt those three will answer, so I'll use the public morals committee. And he's the one that started this in the first place, so let's see if he can actually help society recover."

She then telepathically called Sai Akuto.

"The president must be mad, gya."

"We already made up our minds, so we can't worry about that, arinsu."

Kanna and Michie sighed with dark expressions as they entered the city, but Arnoul shook her head.

"Guga."

"You're right, arinsu," said Michie with a nod. "We should forget it and just have fun, arinsu."

"I see, gya," said Kanna.

They were quick to switch gears and Kanna quickly filled with energy.

"Okay, let's have some fun, gya! Let's start with a light snack of udon and pizza, gya. And then…"

"But you always turn into your beast form after seeing something resembling the full moon like the egg in udon or a pizza, arinsu. Also, that's a lot more than a light snack, arinsu." Michie sounded annoyed, but she still smiled. "But pizza does sound good, arinsu. Come to think of it, a new pizza place was opened by the winner in a competition for spinning pizza dough in one hand, arinsu."

"Then let's get pizza, gya. I won't look at it until its cut, gya. And pizza has the tomato you love so much, gya."

"And I can pour as much red tabasco sauce as I want, arinsu. Come to think of it, Italian food has a lot of red things, arinsu."

"I can't wait, gya!"

The three smiling girls began walking, but Arnoul suddenly spoke.

"Guga."

"Eh? Someone's behind us?"

"No, don't turn around, gya."

Michie and Kanna sounded nervous.

Someone was following them.

"I don't want to get dragged into a commotion after taking this day off, arinsu."

"Hm. That's a L'Isle-Adam, gya."

Kanna's nose twitched as she used her sense of smell.

All three of them held power in a school filled with violent students and they had been involved in more than one war in the past. They looked cute, but they were highly skilled at combat. They estimated their pursuer's abilities without turning around.

"But she's really bad at hiding, arinsu."

"Guga."

"Hm. She's a farming model rather than a combat model? Oh, is that why I smell dirt, gya?"

"I don't know what she wants, but it shouldn't be a problem for us, arinsu."

"Yeah. If it comes down to it, we can do something about it, gya. But it'll be a problem if she follows us, gya. Let's lose her and then have some fun, gya. We'll meet at the soba restaurant in the shopping district."

The three then ran off. They split in three directions at the corner and slipped into the crowd. They would have lost even a skilled pursuer, so a non-combat L'Isle-Adam could never keep up.

Finally, they gathered at the soba restaurant one by one.

"We lost her just fine, gya."

"Now we can relax and eat some soba, ari-… What happened to Italian, arinsu!?"

"Guga."

"I reflexively chose the easiest place to meet up, gya. If we eat some soba, drink some sake, and look around for some new clothes, we'll be hungry again soon enough, gya."

"You should skip the sake, arinsu."

The three of them opened the menu and ordered something light. Finally, sweet soba, normal soba, and buckwheat porridge were lined up on the table.

"Do you mix the wasabi into the soup or put it on the noodles, gya?"

"I've never really paid attention, arinsu."

"Guga."

"You can only eat the buckwheat porridge? Oh, that's right, gya."

The three of them reached for their bowls and continued their ridiculous conversation until they noticed the other customers being oddly noisy.

"Huh?"

"What's with her? Does she want to eat?"

"Don't look!"

All of the customers were looking in one direction and muttering amongst themselves. They were looking toward the window the three girls sat at.

"I have a bad feeling about this, arinsu."

Michie hesitantly turned toward the window.

"Gya!"

"Guga."

Kanna and Arnoul cried out.

A L'Isle-Adam was pressed up against the window.

"That's the one that was following us, gya! I thought we lost her, gya!"

"Guga."

"I see. She's been going around and peering into all the shops and restaurants, arinsu!"

Behind the L'Isle-Adam, people at other shops and restaurants were watching her uneasily. She was drawing their attention.

The L'Isle-Adam looked like a little girl with slender arms and legs. A close look showed she had the same well-featured face as most L'Isle-Adams, but she did not seem to be tending to her looks. Overall, she looked like an energetic rural child.

"So… Who is she, gya?"

"Wh-who knows… Now that she's gone this far, I can't even guess, arinsu."

Kanna and Michie exchanged a glance and stopped moving.

The L'Isle-Adam stared at the three girls like a child wanting a trumpet or a hovering kingfisher targeting a fish in the water. Her expression hinted at a reckless enthusiasm within her. It was an unusual expression for a L'Isle-Adam.

She reached a hand behind her back and pulled out a small sickle. She then left the window and entered through the automatic door. Needless to say, she headed straight for the three girls.

"Wh-wh-what is it, gya!?"

"If you want to say something, calm down and say it, arinsu."

Without listening to Kanna or Michie, the L'Isle-Adam swung up the sickle.

"My name is Monami! I have come to defeat the demon king! I will first exterminate the demon king's three underlings!"

The L'Isle-Adam that gave the name Monami charged toward Kanna and swung down the sickle.

"Toh!"

But it only produced a quiet and silly noise.

Kanna had stopped the sickle by catching the blade between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand.

"C-calm down, gya. No one as cute as us could be the demon king's underlings, gya."

"Liar! You're wearing the uniform!"

Monami struggled, but Kanna lifted the sickle and her along with it.

"The uniform?"

"The school uniform?"

Kanna and Michie exchanged a glance.

"That's the uniform of the demon king's underlings! So I'll exterminate you!" shouted Monami.

"Say what you want, but I still don't get it, gya."

Unsure what to do, Kanna fell silent. Michie then elbowed her in the side.

"A-anyway, let's head outside, arinsu. We're causing trouble for the restaurant, arinsu."

"R-right." Kanna nodded. "It looks like we are, gya."

The customers and workers were staring at them.

Kanna passed her wallet to Arnoul, grabbed as much soba as she could stuff into her mouth, and walked outside with Monami still hanging down from her hand.

"Hey! Let me go, you coward! Fight me fair and square!"

"Yes, yes. I understand, gya. But let's head somewhere else, gya."

"Um, I apologize for the inconvenience, arinsu."

Kanna and Michie continued bowing to the other people even after leaving the restaurant.

As Monami showed no sign of quieting down, they exchanged a troubled glance.

"Guga."

Arnoul left after paying and she pointed to the other end of the shopping district.

"Good idea, arinsu. Let's go the park, arinsu."

"That would be best, gya."

Monami continued to struggle as they walked to the park.

"Let me go! Cowards!"

"You could always just let go of the sickle, gya," suggested Kanna after arriving in the park.

"Oh," said Monami in sudden realization. "You're right."

She let go, fell to the ground, and pointed confidently at Kanna.

"Heh heh heh heh. Now that I'm free, you don't stand a chance. Prepare yourself!"

Monami tried to rush at Kanna again.

"I told you to calm down, gya."

Kanna swung her hand. The fingers still held the sickle and the sickle's handle passed within a few dozen centimeters of Monami's face. But Monami jumped backwards with a frightened look.

"A weapon!? You coward! I get it now. You told me to let go so you could steal my weapon! How dastardly! But I should have expected no less from the demon king's underlings!"

"No, we aren't his underlings, gya."

Kanna was getting annoyed, but Monami had lost her temper.

But then Arnoul stood in Monami's way.

"Guga."

"Nh, you sure are big!"

Monami flinched back.

"Guga, guga, guuga."

"Are you also saying you aren't the demon king's underlings?"

Monami could understand Arnoul's words. And Arnoul then started using a compressed language that other L'Isle-Adams could understand.

"Guga, guuga, guga, guga, guga, gugugguga."

"Eh? The demon king goes to the school that uniform belongs to, but he hasn't taken over the school? And there are a lot of other people who want to exterminate the demon king, but they have all given up after failing? Really?"

Momami repeated what Arnoul was saying.

Arnoul had also conveyed a lot more information to her, but it seemed Monami had only understood that. But that was enough.

"I see…" She looked down with a sad look. "I just wanted to defeat the demon king. I shouldn't have done that to you three. I apologize."

Monami bowed deeply.

"As long as you understand, gya. If you've learned your lesson, stop doing stupid things, gya. Don't attack anyone else just because they're wearing this uniform, gya."

With that, Kanna returned the sickle.

Momami stored it at her waist and began trudging away.

Michie gave a bitter look as she watched her leave.

"I feel like we did something wrong, arinsu."

"What else could we have done, gya? Also, if she's a L'Isle-Adam why is she a small child and why is she so stupid, gya?"

Kanna pouted her lips.

"Guga," responded Arnoul.

According to her, child L'Isle-Adams were created for old people with no children of their own and no one to look after. However, they would often change owners due to their purchaser's death. And when one stayed in one place long enough to gain a sense of self, no one would buy them and they would end up helping with light work such as gardening.

"Also, there's a good chance that this one has some kind of defect, arinsu."

Michie's tone was dark.

"But she must have an owner, gya."

"Guga."

"Even if she does, we can't contact them right away and her telepathic communication ability is probably broken, arinsu?"

Michie shrugged at Arnoul's explanation.

An awkward silence followed.

"W-well, let's go eat some pizza, gya. I can't taste the soba anymore, gya."

Kanna forced a smile.

"Guga."

"Th-that's right, arinsu," said Michie awkwardly. "Even Arnoul is saying we should avoid having anything more to do with her, arinsu."

She and Kanna wrapped their arms around each other's shoulders and began to walk.

"Let's enjoy skipping out on work, gya!"

"Let's enjoy our day without the president, arinsu!"

Their motions were exaggerated, but they had a dead look in their eyes as they went window shopping. Their laughing voices sounded empty.

"Ah ha ha. This is fun, gya."

"It really is, arinsu."

"Guga."

The amount of silence naturally grew. And during that silence, they heard a horrible sound behind them.

Crash!

They turned around with a very bad feeling about what they would find. As expected, they found Monami. And even worse, she seemed to have tripped while charging toward a man sitting outside a café.

"Gya, gya…"

"This is horrible, arinsu…"

Kanna and Michie held their heads in their hands. The man was clearly not just a normal café customer. He wore a brightly-colored suit and had lots of oddly-colored metal accessories jangling about.

"Prepare yourself, underling of the demon king!"

After knocking over one of the café's seats, Monami began saying the same things as before.

Luckily, the man was simply taken aback and had yet to grow angry.

Kanna and Michie exchanged a bitter smile.

"Should we do it, gya?"

"Do we have any other choice, arinsu?"

Michie nodded and Kanna began to run. Kanna jumped in, grabbed Monami, and immediately turned around. Michie then jumped in, fixed the chair and table, and bowed too quickly for anyone to argue.

"I am so very sorry, arinsu! Bye!"

She then ran off even more quickly than Kanna had.

"Sigh… I can't believe this, gya."

"We told you to stop that, arinsu."

After escaping to somewhere or other, they began lecturing Monami while Kanna held her.

But Monami merely looked displeased and said nothing.

"Guga."

Arnoul finally gave in and asked a question, but Monami repeated what she had said before.

"But I have to defeat the demon king."

"And we told you to stop, gya."

Monami shook her head.

"I have to defeat him."

"Y'know, if you really think that, why are you attacking people indiscriminately, gya? Do you not actually know who the demon king is, gya?"

But Monami denied Kanna's accusation.

"He is Sai Akuto of Constant Magic Academy."

"If you know that, why are you going around randomly, gya?"

"The demon king has lots of underlings. It's only natural to defeat them and build up experience."

What she said did have a logic to it, but she showed no sign of growth and she was targeting the wrong people.

"He doesn't have that many underlings and the empress is currently suppressing his power, gya."

Kanna continued arguing, but Monami refused to believe her.

"He has underlings all throughout the city and a lot of the students are his underlings."

"We already told you that isn't the case, gya."

Kanna was unsure what else to say, but suddenly Michie clapped her hands together.

"Then how about we guide you, arinsu?"

"Eh?"

Both Kanna and Monami let out voices of surprise.

Michie then whispered in Kanna's ear.

"I don't know the exact situation, but this is just a child's game, arinsu. If it comes to it, we can call in Sai Akuto and have him play with her a bit, arinsu."

"I see, gya." Kanna agreed. "Okay, gya. We can help you, gya."

She lowered Monami and beat her own chest.

"Help me?"

"That's right, gya. We'll take you to Sai Akuto, gya. We'll fight him with you, gya."

Kanna sounded confident.

With Akuto, they could attack with their full strength and not have to worry. And seeing the intensity of those attacks would surprise Monami enough that she would believe the demon king had been defeated.

However…

"Then let's go! Come with me."

Monami took the lead and began walking. She was acting like she was the leader.

"We said we would guide you, gya."

But Kanna could not get through to her.

"Like I said, we have to do this in order. I know where his underlings are. This just means I don't need to build up experience. You're really strong, after all."

She took long strides forward as she spoke.

The other three quickly followed.

"Eh? You know where his underlings are, arinsu?"

"That's right. I looked into it. Now, come with me, underlings!"

Monami delightedly raised her sickle and walked on.

"Wait… Where are you going, gya?"

"I already told you: to where the demon king's underlings are."

She was walking down a normal residential district.

"Why are we here, arinsu?"

Michie was confused, but Monami stopped in front of a small apartment.

"What? Is this it, gya?"

Monami did not answer Kanna and she walked swiftly up to the apartment. She picked a block off the ground, held it over her head with both hands, and smashed it against the window.

Crash!

"Gya!

"Ee!"

A great sound of destruction rang out, causing Kanna and Michie to cry out in surprise.

"What the hell are you doing!?"

A man in a baggy shirt stuck his head out the window. His head was shaved. In fact, he did not even have eyebrows. He was clearly not a normal person.

"R-run away, gya!"

"This is not good, arinsu!"

Kanna and Michie began to flee, but Monami acted before they could.

"Toh."

She let out a silly cry of effort and stabbed the tip of her sickle into the skinhead's head.

"Gyaaaaa!"

"Eeeeeeee!"

Kanna and Michie screamed even louder.

Blood flowed from the skinhead's head. He had only been stabbed a tiny bit, but he did a wonderful job of bleeding.

"What the hell!?" he roared.

Kanna and Michie glanced around in preparation to run, but Arnoul muttered "guga" and pointed past the road. An angry-looking man was running over. It was the man Monami had tried to attack at the café.

"Is he related to this, arinsu?"

"Wh-what are we supposed to do, gya?"

While Michie and Kanna muttered in confusion, the skinhead grabbed Monami and lifted her up.

"Let me go! Stop that!"

"Don't look down on me, you brat!"

The skinhead gave an amazingly angry look and it was clear something bad was going to happen to Monami.

"Sh-should we do it, gya?"

"I-I'm not sure, arinsu."

Kanna and Michie sweated.

It was not that they were not confident in their ability to win. They were worried about what would happen to an opponent whose ability was not past a certain point.

As they hesitated, Arnoul swiftly ran up.

"Guga!"

She snatched Monami away and knocked away the sickle that the skinhead was attempting to pull from his head and stab into Monami.

"Tch! Who the hell're you!?"

With that shout, the skinhead reached out his right hand. The hand glowed and he fired a mana sphere toward Arnoul.

"Guga!"

Arnoul easily deflected it, but the man's use of magic meant Kanna and Michie could act.

"If you're attacking in the city, it means you're black magicians, gya!"

"In that case, we need not hold back, arinsu!"

The two girls exchanged a nod and moved to the left and right.

"Dogyaaaan!"

Kanna gained a beast's right paw and blasted away the skinhead's attack.

"Take this!"

Michie created a gust of wind and scooped the other man off his feet. She circled around behind him and attacked the back of his neck. He immediately passed out and collapsed to the street.

"If they were black magicians…"

"…it means they really were that kind of person, gya."

Michie and Kanna exchanged a glance.

"Guga."

Arnoul lowered Monami and spoke to the other two girls.

"Guga, guga."

"Eh? What does that mean, gya?"

"Are you saying Monami isn't completely lying, arinsu?"

"Guga, guuga."

Arnoul then gave a summarized version of what Monami had told her.

From what she had seen of Monami's list of the demon king's underlings, they all worked for a group that maliciously bought up land.

"And they're threatening Monami's family to buy their home, arinsu?"

"If that's the problem, we just have to turn them in to the knights, gya."

Kanna was relieved.

"That's right, arinsu. They were probably name-dropping the demon king in their threats, arinsu. If they were the only ones doing anything illegal, this solves everything, arinsu. Now, we don't have time, arinsu. We need to report them, get Monami home, and get some pizza for dinner, arinsu."

"Guga."

Arnoul cut into Michie's happy plans.

"Eh? It isn't that easy, arinsu?"

"Guga, guuga."

"They've bribed the knights, arinsu? They're backed by an illegal group that just wants to commit crimes and doesn't care about the ideals of the black magicians, arinsu?"

"That isn't good, gya."

"I guess just going to the knights is out of the question, arinsu. And come to think of it, there isn't a knight in this city the president hasn't punched, arinsu."

"I doubt they'd be happy to see us even without the bribe, gya. And the knights wouldn't want to take on this group without preparations, gya."

Michie and Kanna's expression gradually darkened.

"Well, can't we just report them, gya? And then leave…gya?"

Kanna forced a smile.

But Michie was not smiling.

"We obviously can't, arinsu. They'd go to Monami's home to take revenge, arinsu."

"Well, yes… But what else can we do, gya?"

"We have to handle it ourselves, arinsu."

Michie shrugged.

"Guga."

Arnoul pointed behind them.

The man Michie had knocked out had stood up and was making a telepathic call while running away.

"This just got a whole lot worse, gya. Now we can't attack their office, gya."

"Monami, Take us to your home. If you don't, it will be destroyed, arinsu."

"So this is Monami's home, arinsu."

"To be blunt, it's…falling apart, gya."

"Guga."

Even Arnoul agreed.

The property was large, but the home in the center was a wooden single-story building. It was made luxuriously, but it was simply too old. The sign called it the Sasahara Inn and it looked a lot like a haunted mansion.

"But I can see why they want the land, gya."

Kanna looked around. The area alone was an oasis of green in the middle of the city. They seemed to own a rather large nature park.

"If they quit being an inn and opened a restaurant, they could probably make a lot of money, arinsu."

"No matter what they do, it doesn't go well. It's so bad that they have to eat the vegetables I grow over there."

Monami pointed toward an orderly vegetable garden by the side of the building.

"Why can't they make any money, gya?"

"That isn't the problem right now, arinsu. This is a difficult place to defend, arinsu."

Those three girls were used to fights, so they could immediately tell how poor an area this was for defending. The other side could travel while hiding behind the trees and they could also set fire to the house.

"This isn't gonna be easy, gya."

"Guga."

As they spoke, a nice-looking couple exited the inn. The wife was quite round and the husband was tall and slender.

"Monami!"

The wife ran over.

"Um, about this, arinsu…"

Before Michie could say anything, the wife bowed.

"Thank you so much. You are from the academy, aren't you? You brought her back just like we asked. She ran off after saying she would defeat the demon king."

It seemed they understood the situation. That sped things up, but they did not seem to fully understand.

"Um, there's more, gya…"

"Yes?"

"It seems, um… Monami-chan attacked and angered the demon king's underlings…well, they weren't really his underlings, gya."

Kanna gave her troubled explanation, but the wife only blinked and did not seem to understand.

"Oh… Is that so?"

"No, you don't understand, gya. Um, to put it simply, some dangerous people will be coming to burn down the house, gya."

Kanna's blunt explanation finally made the wife panic.

"Ehhhh! Wh-wh-what should we do?"

"We can only fight, gya. We'll handle it, so you hole up somewhere in the house and hold onto Monami, gya. She'll try to fight if someone doesn't stop her, gya."

Kanna handed Monami over to the wife.

The wife clung to Monami and began bowing.

"I do not know how to thank you."

"You can think about that later, arinsu. Right now, you need to get inside the house, arinsu."

As Michie urged them on, the husband and wife took Monami inside.

"Now, how will they try to attack, gya?"

"Guga."

"Yeah. They'll probably decide crushing the house is faster than threatening, gya."

"No matter how it happened, we were the ones that attacked them, arinsu. They should go pretty far, arinsu. They probably know the knights won't show up if they only destroy the house, arinsu."

"But they saw us, gya. They'll probably focus on taking revenge against us, so they'll try to pick a fight with us before going after the house, gya."

"Guga."

"They might destroy the house to draw us out, arinsu? It's dangerous, but we'll have to split up and surround the house, arinsu."

The three of them made their plans.

Once they finished, they sensed something out of the ordinary running through the surrounding trees.

"They're here, gya."

"Split up, arinsu."

"Guga."

The three of them ran in three different directions.

It was evening and an incantation gun fired to signal the beginning of the battle.

It was fired toward Kanna who was protecting the rear of the house.

"An explosive type, gya!"

She had been caught off guard, so she had successfully evaded the bullet but was caught in the intense explosion.

The explosion shook the ground and smoke rose into the sky.

To check on his handiwork, the black magician who had fired appeared from the trees while holding an incantation gun.

He expected to see Kanna collapsed on the ground, but when the smoke cleared, he saw a large four-legged beast. It resembled a giant wolf.

"What!?" he cried out in surprise.

"If you're gonna do that, I'll go all out from the beginning, gya!"

Kanna let out a roar in her beast form. She quickly charged toward the black magician, immediately knocked him to the ground, and knocked his weapon away.

But the other black magicians changed their tactics when they saw that. They fired mana spheres and incantation guns from the trees while moving around.

"Gya, gya. Just because the academy students aren't easy to kill doesn't mean it's okay to fire your weapons like crazy, gya."

Kanna complained, but she still kicked off tree trunks, jumped through the air, and knocked three to the ground without setting foot on the ground herself.

However, the attacks continued.

"It looks like defeating me is their only goal now, gya."

Michie was feeling the same as Kanna.

"These guys must have had a run-in with the president before, arinsu."

In the city, Lily Shiraishi was known as the "long-armed demon" by knights and this sort of person. The name came from her habit of stretching her

arms and punching anyone she didn't like. It was not surprising that the knights and this sort of person hated her. They had likely remembered the trio who followed the president and hated them as well.

Just like Kanna, Michie was forced into a hard fight. She was calling in mechanical bats and attacking with them. That should have given her quite an advantage in this environment, but it seemed some of the black magicians were quite skilled. They had noticed the weak point of the mechanical bats and had started using magic to create ultrasonic interference. That meant Michie could only control the bats she could see.

"If I call the bats back toward me, I can protect myself and the house, arinsu. But…"

She was hiding behind the incinerator, so she was not being fired on like Kanna was, but this was no different from hiding behind cover and firing back and forth. And if it came down to a war of attrition, the side with greater numbers would have the upper hand.

"This isn't good, arinsu."

Arnoul was having a difficult fight as well. She was forced to fight an excavator that the black magicians had brought with them, and she was doing so bare-handed.

"Gugaga…"

She held the bucket and blocked its path forward, but even with her ridiculous strength, that was the most she could manage. And while she could not move, the black magicians fired mana spheres and incantation guns from a distance. She was resisting with a defense field, but it used up a lot of mana and could not defend against all of it.

"Gugagaga… Guga!" she screamed.

The excavator's arm moved back and forth and Arnoul could not resist its strength while using some of her own power for defense.

The bucket lifted her up and tossed her away.

"Guga!"

After being thrown to the ground, she felt something soft on her back, so she looked behind her. Kanna and Michie had been tossed over at the same time.

"Uuh… Th-this isn't good, gya."

"At best, we have our hands full just protecting ourselves, arinsu."

"Guga."

The three girls exchanged muddy glances.

But before they could do anything, they were surrounded by ill-bred black magicians.

"You underestimated us, little ladies."

A man with a white suit and a pompadour who seemed to be the leader stepped forward.

The girls remained silent and the man in a white suit continued speaking.

"Well, I don't want this to get any more complicated, so let's settle this here. We won't kill you, but we need to make sure you cry nicely."

He used his chin to gesture to the other men. Three men stepped forward, grabbed the girls' hair, and forced them to their feet.

"They might call for help. Break the inn's lock and force your way in."

On the leader's instructions, a few men began kicking down the door.

"S-stop…" groaned Kanna, but another man silenced her with a punch to the gut.

"Gh…"

She grimaced more from the humiliation than the pain.

"Stay quiet. We won't kill you. We brought enough people to fight a war because we thought your president was coming, but it looks like we lucked out. It's too late to call her now."

As the leader said that, the men successfully kicked down the inn's door.

"Gh… We should've called the president, gya."

"We were skipping out on work, so we couldn't, arinsu."

"Uuh… I just wanted some pizza, gya. Why did this have to happen, gya?"

Kanna lamented, but no one was listening.

Except for one person.

"Oh, dear. It looks like nothing will make everyone happy here."

The black magicians frowned at the voice from behind them.

"What kind of gutless shit are you going on about?"

The man in a white suit had assumed one of his men said that, but he froze in place once he turned around.

"Wha-…? That's the real deal!"

"The real deal?" muttered the other black magicians.

The person the leader was referring to groaned with a difficult expression.

"If you're gonna be that surprised when I show up, I'd prefer you didn't use my name in the first place."

"Eh? Then…"

The black magicians frantically moved away from him.

"You idiots! This is no time to chicken out!"

The leader pointed at the newcomer – Sai Akuto – and gestured toward their three hostages.

The black magicians began pressed incantation guns against the girls' faces.

Akuto grimaced.

"This is why I said nothing will make everyone happy."

In the very next instant, the arms of the men holding the girls spread to either side. It was as if their bodies had moved against their wills.

"H-hey, what the hell are you doing?" fearfully asked the man in a white suit.

"I-I don't know. It feels like some ridiculous strength is holding me."

The leader turned back toward Akuto.

Akuto nodded with a cloudy expression.

"I'm doing that, but I really don't want to. Of course, I doubt you care about what I want, so let's keep this short and free of explanations."

"Wh-what the hell are you talking-… Eh!?"

The leader tried to fire some magic, but his movements were stopped. His arms spread on their own and it looked like he was hanging from a cross.

"Impossible… You can't have enough mana strength to hold this many people at once!" shouted the leader in confusion.

He still had no fear in his expression which brought a look of disappointment to Akuto's face.

"If you understand that, then can you guess what I'm thinking right now? In other words, can you guess what you have to do for me to forgive you?"

Akuto let out a sigh.

The leader and his men seemed to finally catch on. They all gave obedient smiles and began apologizing.

"W-we're so very sorry for using your name. It's just that your name is so respected in the world. I know! How about you make us your official underlings?"

Akuto shook his head without even bothering to listen to the end.

"No. That isn't what I want."

There was no anger in his voice, but the man in the white suit let out a tremendous shriek. His right arm twisted and produced cracking noises.

"Gyaaaah! I-I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Th-that wasn't what I meant… W-we will back off from this entire incident… So…"

"That isn't it either."

Akuto spoke like a parent scolding a child and he turned toward the leader's left arm. This time, the man's left arm twisted much too far. Another scream rose into the dark sky.

"You're apologizing to the wrong person. Do you really not understand that?"

Akuto waved a hand and all the black magicians floated up into the air. They then all lined up side by side in front of Akuto as if they were sucked toward him.

Their expressions were frozen in terror, but Akuto spoke much like a teacher.

"Now, does anyone know what the right thing to do is?"

Unsurprisingly, none of them dared say anything. Surrounded by silence, Akuto shook his head in annoyance.

"You're supposed to apologize to those three."

He waved his hand again. Five nearby men's arms twisted and five screams burst out.

Those whose arms remained untwisted frantically began apologizing.

"I'm sorry! I-I'm sorry!"

But Akuto immediately rejected those apologies.

"Apologizing after you're told to is worthless!"

Another five arms or legs twisted.

The black magicians writhed about on the ground after having their skeletal structure destroyed.

"Now, does anyone know what you should do?" asked Akuto once more.

But once again, no one responded. As he repeated the question again and again, all thirty of the black magicians eventually began writhing on the ground and giving pathetic screams.

"H-how frightening, gya."

"I-is this what you call a lecturing criminal, arinsu? No, this is even worse than that, arinsu."

"Guga."

The three rescued girls gathered together and trembled.

"Why don't you understand? Why can't you do something as simple as apologizing properly and then swearing to live a proper life?"

Akuto shook his head with a dark look.

"W-we swear! We swear already!"

The man in the white suit was in tears.

But Akuto shook his head again.

"Again, doing it after I tell you to is worthless."

He began to twist some more limbs, but he realized there were no more limbs left to twist.

"Well, whatever. What matters is that you truly understand. That's what it comes down to."

As he muttered those words, the black magicians floated into the air again. Mana gathered around their twisted limbs and they visually returned to normal. Their pale faces even regained their color.

They gained relieved smiles and shed tears of regret.

"Th-thank you. We understand now. We've had a change of heart."

The leader quickly prostrated himself before Akuto.

In that instant, Akuto's eyes glittered in displeasure.

"I told you in the beginning that you're apologizing to the wrong person. This is just you apologizing because I hurt you!"

Akuto shouted angrily and twisted the man's entire body this time.

"Gyaaaaaaaah!"

The gruesome sight caused all the other black magicians to tremble. The three girls were at a loss for words as well.

Akuto looked down on them coldly and spoke in a troubled tone.

"I will twist you and heal you as many times as it takes for you to understand. If even one of you fails to understand, the responsibility will lie with the entire group. Do you understand?"

The black magicians were unable to speak.

"I've seen this kind of unreasonableness before, gya."

"That was our PE teacher during elementary school, arinsu."

Kanna and Michie trembled, but they could only watch the scene playing out before them.

Human bones broke, human bodies were bent in all sorts of horrible ways, and then they were regenerated. It was like peeking into hell itself.

When the destruction and regeneration reached its third cycle, the people of the Sasahara family noticed something was odd and cautiously peeked out from the destroyed front door.

"Eeeee!"

"Waaaaaah!"

Just seeing it was enough for the wife and husband's legs to give out.

Not many could remain sane after seeing the demon king standing coldly before a group of ill-bred men who writhed in a pool of blood after their skeletons had been crushed.

"It's the real demon king!"

"A-at least spare us our lives!"

After shouting that, the two fainted.

Seeing that, Akuto finally reflected on the situation. He walked over to the three girls and scratched his head.

"Sorry. I should have chosen a better place for this."

"…I think this goes beyond that, gya."

"Y-you went a little overboard…arinsu."

"Guga."

They all shook their heads in confusion.

Then a stone flew their way. Akuto deflected it with a hand just before it reached Kanna.

"Monami," muttered Michie after looking toward where the stone had come from.

"Wahhhhh! You really do work with the demon king! Otherwise, you wouldn't do something so horrible in front of the house and knock out my masters! And the house is damaged, too! Leave! Leave!"

As she cried and shouted, she frantically threw stones.

"Um…"

Kanna prepared to say something, but Michie stopped her.

"Don't worry about it, arinsu. The issue was resolved, arinsu."

"Guga."

Arnoul stood up and urged the other two to do the same.

Kanna nodded and stood. After walking a bit, she turned toward Monami, but Monami only threw a stone at her.

"Ah… Sorry. This was my bad. I'm not sure what to say… Well, I'll help clean up."

With a dark look, Akuto began loading the black magicians in the bucket of the excavator they had brought. He then lifted the excavator on one shoulder and walked in the opposite direction of the three girls.

With a bitter smile, Kanna watched him leave.

"He really isn't normal, gya."

"I feel stupid for taking this all so seriously, arinsu."

"Guga."

"But he will probably clean everything up, gya."

They gave the Sasahara Inn a parting glance while trudging down the nighttime streets.

"This was one hell of a day off, gya."

"Technically, it wasn't even a day off, arinsu."

"Guga."

"Yeah. We tried to slip out, but… Ah! It's past curfew, gya!"

"Ahh! You're right, arinsu!"

"Guga, guaga, guagaugaugau!"

"Arnoul, don't get so flustered, gya! Oh, but now the president's definitely gonna punish us, gya."

"Sigh… I only wanted some pizza, arinsu."

"I was planning to torture you with my grandmother's soy sauce rice crackers until you wished you were dead, but instead, you get to camp outside tonight."

When the three girls arrived back late at night, Lily Shiraishi gave them a look that made it seem like she had an itch she couldn't reach.

"C-camp outside, gya?"

"Yes. In other words, you get no dinner, you get no beds, and you don't get to go into town. Sleep in the mountain on the academy grounds. That's all."

"Um… Is that really all, arinsu?"

"You sure are insistent! If you want, I can give you morons an even greater punishment!"

As Lily shouted angrily, the other three obediently scattered.

They found a gently-sloping area of the mountain and looked up at the stars together.

"Ahh, how did it end up like this, gya?"

Kanna complained while sitting on the bare ground and Michie pouted her lips.

"Complaining won't help, arinsu. It will only make you hungrier, arinsu. Also, you'll still look fine if you get dirty, but I would much rather stay clean, arinsu."

"You're already plenty dirty from the fight, gya. Don't worry about it, gya."

"Honestly, it pisses me off that we lost, arinsu. If you had only-…"

"Guga."

"Ahh, you're right, arinsu. Fighting will only make us hungrier."

Michie rolled on her side while ignoring how dirty it was making her cape. Then she continued complaining.

"Ahh, pizza… Mozzarella and Gouda… Tomato paprika salami…"

"Quiet, gya. You're making me hungry."

"But!"

Michie thrashed her arms and legs around.

Someone then called out to them.

"Excuse me…"

"Hm?"

The turned toward the voice and found Akuto climbing the mountain with a large bag.

"Wh-what is it, gya?" asked Kanna while half averting her gaze.

Neither side was at fault, but what had happened was still awkward.

"I dealt with the issue. I even protested to the knights. Anyway, it's all taken care of. But… I heard what you said back then," he said awkwardly.

"What we said back then?" asked Michie.

Akuto lowered the bag and began gathering stones.

"Yeah. You wanted to eat pizza, right? I also heard the president wouldn't let you have any dinner."

"What does that have to do with gathering stones, gya?"

"Even a simple stove can cook things. I thought I'd make a pizza. I brought some dough and the ingredients."

Akuto arranged the stones into three sides of a square and opened the bag for the girls to see.

"Oh!"

"Ah!"

"Guga!"

Their eyes sparkled and they began to speak.

"Amazing, gya! I can see why you've won over so many girls, gya!"

"This hardworking side must be the secret, arinsu!"

"Um, I won't give you any if you keep saying that."

"Just kidding, gya! I just wanted to say I was falling for you, gya!"

"That's right, arinsu! Now, bring on the red food!"

"Why red? Anyway, go gather some wood."

"Guga."

"Then pack dirt between the stones."

Soon, Akuto began cooking the pizza. In a few minutes, he had completed a large, round, well-cooked pizza.

"Gya! Gya!"

"Oh, oh!"

"Guga!"

The three girls grew excited when they saw the pizza and Kanna carelessly turned into her beast form when she saw its round shape. They gathered around the pizza like starving children and continued eating until all the ingredients were used up. They ate three pizzas in total.

"Well, I'll be sleeping in my dorm room."

After eating a slice or two himself, Akuto thanked them and started to leave.

"Eh! Sleep here with us, gya!"

"That's right, arinsu! In fact, hold us as we sleep!"

Kanna and Michie grew ridiculously excited, but once Akuto left, they quickly grew sleepy. Michie and Arnoul lay on Kanna's stomach as she curled up in beast form.

"Oh, I just had a thought, arinsu," said Michie as she looked up in the sky.

"What is it, gya?"

"I wonder if the president lightened our punishment because Sai Akuto spoke with her, arinsu."

Kanna fell silent for a moment and then gave an impressed-sounding voice.

"Oh, you might be right, gya. But…Even with horrible people like those black magicians, a good person wouldn't smash their bones and lecture them, gya."

"You're right, arinsu. Well, let's not worry about it and just sleep, arinsu."

"Guga."

"Ah, but I am worried about Monami, gya."

"We never dealt with that misunderstanding, arinsu. But thinking about it won't help, arinsu."

The three then fell asleep.

But in the morning, someone climbed the mountain to wake them.

"Wake up."

It was Sasahara Nozomi, the maid janitor who had was already becoming famous within the academy.

"Nn…"

Wh-why are you here to wake us up, arinsu?"

The three looked up at her with puzzled looks and Nozomi held out her work handbook.

"I got a message. I forwarded it to the student council president and she told me to show it to you and to wake you up while I was at it."

Nozomi displayed an image on the handbook. It had a message written in terrible handwriting.

<Sorry. My masters received word about what happened. Thank you. You aren't on the demon king's side. Sorry again. Thank you. –Monami>

"The president must have contacted them, gya."

"Good. Now I don't have to worry, arinsu."

"Guga."

The three of them gave relieved smiles as if they were feeling ticklish.

"Why did that ridiculous letter make you grin like that? She's so stupid that she manually wrote the message and had my mom send it. She can't do anything other than dig up potatoes."

Nozomi looked confused and Michie's eyes opened wide.

"Eh? Your mom? Ah! Come to think of it, that run-down inn's name was Sasahara, arinsu!"

"Yeah, that's my home. Sorry it's so run-down, but it won't be for long. I'll use my genius money-making scheme to turn it into a tall building. I've already made the preparations. I convinced a group to threaten people into selling their land using the demon king's name and then I told the demon king about it. One that happens, the demon king will attack them and win.

Once it's known as land protected by the demon king, its value will rise and selling a portion of the land will make me tons of-… hm?"

Nozomi noticed an unusual atmosphere and looked toward the other three girls.

Their faces were as monstrous as someone who was facing their parents' killer after pursuing them for ten years.

"So you were behind all this, gya."

"I think it's time for the president's grandmother's soy sauce rice crackers, arinsu."

"Guga."

"Eh? Wait. What are you doing? Why are you mad?"

Nozomi fearfully backed away from the three who gradually approached.

Neither Nozomi nor the other three ever spoke of what happened after that.

Chapter 4: Welcome to the Haunted Inn

"Perfect! This plan is perfect! It's flawless! Foolproof! Wonderful! The world is mine!"

Nozomi laughed alone in the janitorial room. She had written a section in her handbook that was titled "Ultimate Empress Plan". In other words, it was her last resort for becoming empress.

"This is truly my last resort. I'll call the empress to my home! And I'll use the special aspect of my home to mentally confuse her and have her give me the throne!"

She grew so excited that she shouted out all alone and her forehead glittered brightly.

"What is your home's special aspect?"

"Ghosts! The Sasahara inn is haunted! …Wah!"

She realized someone had spoken to her from behind, so she jumped away.

She had not truly been all alone. Korone stood behind her.

"Wh-why are you here?"

"I am unsure why you would need to ask. You sent the empress a letter saying she had been chosen to spend a night at your hot spring inn."

Korone held the letter in front of Nozomi.

"Th-that's the letter I sent out! Why is the first step of my plan here instead of with the empress!?"

"You really are stupid. I am the empress's maid, so I inspect all of her mail."

"Y-you have a system like that!? But why are you here?"

"I performed a preliminary investigation of the inn and have decided we will go."

"Ahh! My perfect plan has already failed! …Eh? You'll go? Go where?"

As Nozomi realized what Korone had said, she turned back toward her.

"We will use these tickets and stay at the Sasahara inn for a night."

"Eh? Really? But why?"

"Is there a reason why we should not?"

"No. Of course it would be better if you did."

"Then that settles it. Oh, one other thing. These tickets are for a discount, but please make it free."

"F-free!?"

"Would you rather we not stay?"

"Th-then the empress alone can stay for free…"

Nozomi hesitantly conceded that much and Korone nodded.

"Very good. I have a feeling some others will try to tag along, so try to adapt to the situation as needed."

"U-um…"

Nozomi called out to Korone as she started to leave.

"What is it?"

"Well, um… Why are you going along with this even though you overheard my plan?"

"Because it sounds fun," immediately answered Korone.

"Eh?"

Nozomi was taken aback, but Korone quickly continued.

"That was a joke. No, about half of it was a joke."

"H-half? Then what about the other half?"

But Korone did not answer her question.

"That is a secret."

"A secret…"

Nozomi was confused, but Korone silently left the room.

"Mhh. Now I'm curious. But this is my chance. I need to put together an even more amazing plan!"

Suddenly filled with even more excitement, she began drawing up an even more ridiculous plan.

"We get to go to the hot spring!"

Keena happily showed off the tickets.

"I see. That's nice."

Akuto answered without looking away from the screen he was reading a book on.

As usual, Keena was in Akuto's room chowing down on snacks made from rice flower. His reaction was only natural, but Keena pouted her lips.

"No, A-chan. You're going too."

"Eh?"

He turned around and saw that she had three tickets spread out like a fan.

"Three? So that's you, me, and…Korone?"

"Yeah! Let's go. It'll be fun. And it's free. The rice at an inn tastes completely different!"

She was clearly excited, but Akuto looked contemplative.

"But if you stay somewhere like that, won't it cause a small commotion? And if it's just us…"

Akuto tried to decline, but Korone climbed down from her shelf and cut in.

"I have already arranged the security, press restrictions, and other formalities. All that remains is for you to keep your hands off the empress."

"That's right! Way to go, Korone-chan. I'm exhausted from my official duties, so I need this time to relax."

"I don't recall you performing any kind of official duties. No, I guess that doesn't matter. But wait…"

He started to ask if there was more to this, but Korone stopped him with a look.

He picked up on the look in her eyes and took one of the tickets.

"Then I guess I'll go. We have different rooms, right?"

"Yes. We leave tomorrow. It is not far, so we can walk."

"It's too bad we aren't going farther away, but whatever. This'll still be fun. Okay, see you tomorrow."

Keena handed a ticket to Korone as well and left through the window.

After watching her leave, Akuto turned to Korone.

"So what is this about?"

"Look at the ticket. The inn is named Sasahara. That is the same name as that janitor. In other words, this is her home."

"Oh, that's the place I went the other day."

"Yes. As you know, Sasahara Nozomi claims to have imperial blood and she has caused trouble on multiple occasions. But my investigation has shown that there might be some truth to her claim."

"Eh? Really?"

"It is simply a possibility. I discovered a record that an imperial treasure was transferred to the Sasahara family. I have already had the Imperial Knights investigate further and they have confirmed the existence of that treasure."

"What is it?"

"The Imperial Seal. I do not know what it does, but it may be made to react to imperial blood."

"The Imperial Seal? Who would have thought the proof of an emperor would be found in a place like that."

"Indeed. It was the loss of the Imperial Seal that led to the Imperial Regalia being used to identify the emperor. That was originally the Imperial Seal's job."

"So that's why Keena has to go."

"Yes. The Imperial Knights will be protecting her in secret. And I have had the inn operate as normal. The inn does not actually know what I have told you."

"But won't it still cause a commotion if the empress goes there?"

"This plan was suggested by Sasahara Nozomi-san who wishes to take the imperial throne. The inn is likely prepared. How they have prepared is another matter entirely, though. Also, I have prevented any effects outside the academy by shutting out all press. Rumors will spread, but only that she is spending a night at the inn. The whole truth will reach the world at large afterwards."

Korone explained it all at once and Akuto nodded.

"In that case, I will focus on stopping Nozomi-san's pranks. I hope nothing happens, though. Her parents seem like nice people."

With another contemplative look, he continued speaking.

"But why do we have to maintain the imperial system? I know I'm not one to talk, but wouldn't a system that doesn't cause commotions all the time be better?"

"Artificial intelligences like me understand that humans enjoy those commotions," said Korone.

"Yeah, I'm sure you think that and I bet the gods do too. When you aren't taking part, even war and slaughters can look enjoyable enough."

Akuto shrugged and Korone answered coolly.

"For a human, you are very much like us. And to answer your previous question, the imperial system is maintained because it is convenient."

"I understand that, but I just don't like it for some reason. I don't want to start a war, but there are systems that I want to destroy."

"That is a dangerous statement. But instead of discussing the world at large, we should focus on a much more imminent problem."

Korone pointed outside the window.

"What is it?"

Akuto looked out and saw Nozomi selling tickets.

"Come and get them! I'm selling tickets! These tickets are for the same day the empress and demon king are staying at the inn. You don't want to miss what will happen there. And they're cheap!"

She was waving around a fanned-out pile of tickets while speaking with a thick accent. She wore sunglasses and a mask and a sign made from cardboard hung from her neck.

"Wow…" said Akuto sadly.

"I did allow them to continue business as usual. Do not worry. No one would actually buy a ticket from-… Oh, there's one."

Just as Korone had said, Fujiko had latched on to the sales pitch.

"Really? Akuto-sama and Keena are staying there!?"

"Yes, it's true. Very true."

"Argh! I can't allow that! I will stay too! How much?"

"Right now, you get the discount price of 20 thousand yen."

"That is hardly a discount!"

"Then don't buy it."

Nozomi's fake accent made the conversation sound ridiculous, but Fujiko managed to drive the ticket price down to 14,500 yen.

"Oh… I don't know where she heard about this, but Kita Yoshie-san just bought one. And Kita-san has called over Hattori-san. Hattori-san is saying she does not want to go, but she just bought a ticket while pretending Kita-san forced her into it."

Korone calmly continued her running commentary.

"You don't have to explain it all…"

Akuto was holding his head in his hands after turning away from the window.

"Welcome."

The husband and wife bowed and looked nervous when they saw Akuto. Akuto knew the situation, so he gave as kind an expression as he could

manage. The information they had received after the fact would have shown them they had made a misunderstanding, but they could not help but fear Akuto after what they had seen.

His unexpectedly gentle behavior must have reassured them a bit and Fujiko's well-mannered greeting must have been effective because the wife managed to properly greet Akuto like a normal guest.

In the end, Akuto, Keena, Korone, Junko, Fujiko, and Yoshie were staying at the inn. They had one large room for the girls and a private room for Akuto. Also, Nozomi greeted them in the entrance with a grin on her face.

—I'll have the empress hand over the throne in their large room.

As she had that thought, she did an admirable job of bowing.

"Welcome."

"Wow. This is amazing," said Keena happily as she looked around the lobby. "I love this kind of atmosphere."

"This kind of atmosphere? Well… I suppose it does have a sort of atmosphere," said Fujiko doubtfully.

The lobby carpet was smooth and worn down. The leather of the sofa was thin and worn through in places and the glass table was cloudy. Not only were the thick wooden columns covered in small scrapes, but the surface had been shaved down so much in places that they had visibly narrowed.

"It all looks maintained, but still…"

Yoshie was as outspoken as always. While everything was certainly damaged, nothing was covered in dust. It was just all so old that normal maintenance could not hide it all.

"You shouldn't say that," scolded Junko.

However, Yoshie was right, so Junko could not exactly defend the inn's interior.

Normally, Nozomi would have said something too, but she did not react this time because she planned to make use of how old the inn was.

"It is old, but that shows how much history it holds," she said. "For example, there is that wicker chair hanging from the ceiling."

Nozomi pointed toward the back corner of the lobby where a wicker chair was attached to the ceiling with wire. No one could sit in it, so it looked like a piece of interior decoration.

"Anyone who sits in that chair will die within a week. Anyone who tries to get rid of it also dies, so we store it up there where no one can sit in it."

The biggest problem was that Nozomi's story was true.

"But… Curses don't actually exist, right?" asked Junko worriedly.

She grabbed Akuto's sleeve, but she was the only one that was afraid. Fujiko brushed Junko's hand from Akuto's sleeve and rebuked her.

"Of course not. Curses are often mistakenly thought to be a part of black magic, but anything that uses mana to function can be resisted like any other magic. If a spell has been used on it to interfere with people's internal mana and kill them, it would give off a great presence."

"Sometimes coincidences just keep happening. Then again, life would be pretty boring without those coincidences. In fact, maybe we should assume there are mysterious things out there."

Yoshie did not seem to take either side, but she was certainly not afraid.

As for Keena…

"A-chan, that's amazing. And scary."

She said it was scary, but a smile covered her entire face.

"Well, there are some things that are more fun if you believe them."

Akuto nodded with a look of disinterest.

—Kh. But I've only just begun!

Nozomi mentally bit her lip, but her actual lips were smiling.

"It's quite popular with our guests. But even just looking at it can affect your health, so let me show you to your rooms."

Nozomi led the group further into the inn. As she walked down the hallway, she indicated an empty room.

"Three people hanged themselves in this room over a hundred year period. You need not worry because you are staying in the next room, but people

sometimes hear a creaking sound from the ceiling joist. That is the sound of the joist creaking from the weight of the rope in the next room."

Her forehead shined smoothly as she gave the creepy explanation.

"Wait a minute… Please stop that."

Junko's voice was trembling once more, but the others reacted much like before.

"You can always use necromancy to hear what the dead thought while they were alive."

"That would be the wood expanding and contracting in the cold night."

"That sounds scary, A-chan."

"Yes. Suicide is an unfortunate thing."

—I-I know modern people tend not to believe in ghosts, but these magic students are especially tough.

Nozomi began to panic.

"This here is the girls' room. It is a large room, but please be careful with the mirror on one side of the room," said Nozomi as soon as she showed them the room. "A woman in white sometimes comes from it and I've heard she will drag people into the mirror."

"I-if you get dragged in, do you die?"

Junko's voice was trembling.

"You do," assured Nozomi.

"Eeeee!"

Junko let out a high-pitched scream, but Akuto placed a hand on her shoulder.

"If someone had died like that, there would be records of it. Sasahara-san, I know you're trying to make this an enjoyable experience, but you'll ruin it if you go too far."

"No, this is very true. I am trying to warn you."

"Sure, sure."

Akuto did not feel like arguing, but then Fujiko clung to his arm.

"Kyah! How scary! What should I do? The evil spirit of the mirror is going to kill me! If that happens, will you protect me, Akuto-sama?"

She gave him an upturned look, but he gave a troubled frown.

"Sorry, but even I can tell you're faking that."

"Tch!"

Fujiko clicked her tongue.

Afterwards, the girls remained in the large room and Nozomi led Akuto to his room.

And for some reason, Korone was tagging along.

"You don't have to see my room."

"I would like to know where your room is just in case."

Nozomi was giving the histories of the rooms as usual and Akuto had been ignoring her, but what she said next caught his attention.

"And the room beyond this one is sealed off. Soon after the inn opened, a horrible mass murder occurred there and it has been sealed ever since."

Akuto exchanged a glance with Korone.

"Could something be hidden in there?"

"Heh heh heh. I take it you've heard? The legendary vase that seals an evil spirit is contained inside. And that vase is actually…"

Nozomi continued her explanation, but Akuto looked Korone in the eye.

She nodded and whispered to him.

"The item was found in their underground storeroom, but the knights have not actually performed the final check to see if it is real or not. It looks like we need to continue the investigation."

"Yes," said Akuto.

"Huh? Why are you whispering to each other? Are you scared? Then you should be careful."

Nozomi grinned while ignorant of what they were truly talking about.

And while Akuto placed his things in his room, she whispered to Korone.

"How do you like this perfect plan? I am scaring the empress until she feels mentally trapped."

"I can see that," replied Korone. "But more importantly, is the story you just told true to the best of your knowledge?"

"Eh? Of course it's true."

"Understood. Keep up the good work on your plan."

Korone walked past Nozomi who was giving a confused look and she entered Akuto's room.

"I do not want to believe it, but this could become a problem. Be careful."

"She doesn't seem to be threatening us, but ghosts don't exist."

"Do not be so sure."

Korone's expression was quite serious. Then again, her expression was always serious.

"Now that looks like a threat."

"Not at all. Oh, we will all be eating in the large room. And feel free to visit the bath until then. We can carry out the investigation during the night. We will look through the inn and protect the Imperial Seal until morning. Then we will show it to the empress."

"Understood. Let's take it easy until we start investigating tonight."

The sun began to set and Akuto walked to the large bath on his own. The girls seemed to be busy changing, but the men's bath and women's bath were separate, so there was no need to head there together. Looking forward to being alone for the first time in a while, he peacefully opened the door to the changing room.

The changing room was clean but old. The baskets to put one's clothes in had a layer of fluff from years of use. Akuto did not believe in the paranormal, but he still sensed a gloomy air in the room.

"I feel bad saying it, but I can see why they don't get many guests."

He opened the door to the bath and found an open air bath of decent size. It was surrounded by trees, so no one would be able to see in from outside.

"I haven't been able to relax like this in a while."

He sank into the water and let out a relaxed sigh. The warmth wrapping around his body seemed to take away his weariness.

Meanwhile, someone hid in a tree right next to Akuto. Needless to say, it was Nozomi.

"Heh heh heh. If he's here in the men's bath, he can't immediately track me down if I mess with the women's bath."

While straddling a branch, she pulled a bottle from her pocket and grinned.

It contained a powder that turned red when dissolved in water. She could turn the women's bath into a lake of blood by scattering it from above.

"And the red conveniently returns to clear after a few minutes. After they scream and run away, they'll come back and wonder if they were imagining it or if it was something paranormal."

Because Akuto was in the bath, Nozomi averted her gaze and felt her heart beat a little faster as she waited for the girls to enter the women's bath. But an unexpected voice from below brought her gaze to Akuto.

"E-Etou-san! Why are you here!?"

Akuto could not be blamed for crying out in surprise. Fujiko had embraced him from behind while completely naked.

"Why else? Because I missed you, Akuto-sama."

Her voice could only be called bewitching.

"But this is the men's bath."

"There are no other guests. I even entered through the main entrance."

"Yes, but…"

"Oh, do you not like it? I hurried here before the others, so we do not have much time. Now, let us hurry up and get down to business."

"G-get down to business? What do you mean?"

The sight made Nozomi gulp as she watched on from above. She naturally had no experience with this kind of thing, so her heart beat so fast she thought it would burst from her chest. She knew she should not watch, but her eyes were glued to the two of them.

"I think you know perfectly well what I mean."

"Yes, but we shouldn't do things like that."

"Oh? If you are referring to your religious doctrine, that no longer applies to you. And this is not a problem under standard ethics, so I will give you a healthy child."

Fujiko stroked Akuto's chest from behind and brought his hand to her chest.

"A child!? No, um… wait!"

"Ahh, I love you how you are usually so strong and yet so cute at times like this."

Akuto and Fujiko began to squirm about inside the bath.

By this point, Nozomi's blood had completely rushed to her head. Her eyes were glittering and she was breathing heavily.

—E-ee… Amazing… This is amazing enough, but what if it gets even more amazing? Wait. Why is my face wet? Oh, my nose is bleeding.

By the time she caught on, it was too late. The blood dripping from her nose fell on Akuto and Fujiko.

"Wait, Etou-san. Something just fell on me."

"Heh heh. Do you really think you can trick me like that? Or are you embarrassed by what's going on down here? …Huh? Blood?"

—Oh, no!

Nozomi thought about running, but it turned out she did not have to.

"Stop right there!"

She heard a shout and the sound of something being sliced.

She looked over just in time to see the bamboo divider between the men's and women's baths being sliced apart by a Japanese sword.

Junko then kicked it down from the women's side and appeared on the men's side.

"What do you think you're doing!?" she shouted, but she received oddly calm responses.

"Wait a second. This is blood," said Akuto.

"Wh-why is the water red?" asked Fujiko.

"Do you really think you can trick me like-… Hyaaaaaah!"

Junko's initially energetic voice changed to a scream.

—Eh? Isn't that a bit much for a small nosebleed?

Nozomi looked away from Junko and towards the bath Akuto and Fujiko were in.

The entire bath was growing red.

—Ah. Don't tell me I dropped the bottle.

She checked the bottle in her hand, but it was still closed, it had not broken, and it retained its contents.

"Th-then what is that?" she muttered.

Akuto and Fujiko put on towels and left the bath. The open-air bath was not that large, but it still contained dozens of times the water of a normal household bath. Disturbing red smoke was rising from about half of it.

"Wh-what is that? I-is it a real curse?"

Nozomi's voice was trembling with fear.

"This is human blood," said Korone after testing the composition of the water.

They had called Nozomi's mother to get permission and have her check if anything was wrong, but they had only learned two things: it was human

blood and it had been thrown into the bath from outside rather than entering through the hot water opening.

"Is this harassment from the group that was trying to buy up the land?" suggested Akuto.

"It would be difficult for them to accomplish this," said Korone with a shake of her head.

Akuto recalled that the Imperial Knights were secretly protecting the area.

"Then I don't know… J-just to be sure, this isn't one of your pranks, is it?"

"I do not blame you for suspecting me, but I did not do this. However, I was neglecting to monitor Nozomi-san's actions."

"Then it's possible she did this."

Akuto groaned with a sullen look, but Nozomi had vanished.

In the end, they all took turns using their rooms' indoor baths, changed into yukatas, and ate dinner. Eating all the food kindly served by Nozomi's mother should have been an enjoyable experience, but their discussions naturally turned toward the paranormal.

"H-hey. There really is not anything going on here, is there?" asked Junko worriedly.

"You believe in that nonsense too much. It is entirely possible that Nozomi-san prepared a large quantity of human blood."

Fujiko teased Junko, but Fujiko's voice was less cheerful than usual.

"That actually scares me more. But it's real human blood, so someone had to have been there, right? Can you detect their mana?"

Yoshie turned toward Korone.

"I do not think a mana canceller was in effect, but I cannot detect anything. I do not know why."

Korone's words silenced them all.

"I am very sorry. That is where someone once had their head split open with a rock as they bathed," said Nozomi's mother as if that were an explanation.

All their expressions grew even heavier.

"Well… At any rate, let's think of this as an actual incident. Korone and I will search for Nozomi-san. The rest of you stay in the room. Does that sound good?"

Everyone agreed with Akuto's suggestion.

Once they had finished eating, Nozomi's mother left apologetically and Korone began making some tea. Akuto chose his words carefully in order to put the others at ease.

"I'm sure it was just a prank."

"I hope it was…" said Junko in a gloomy voice.

"Of course it was a prank," said Fujiko. "We have some kind of enemy and we are looking worried because it is creepy. You are the only one that actually believes in ghosts. How can you believe in ghosts in an age where almost all mysteries have been solved?"

Junko pouted her lips.

"My family's religion performs some traditional rituals and they include a belief in mysterious powers."

"That is a discrepancy created by mixing belief in such powers with a god who is nothing but a system. And Akuto-sama hates that, remember? Suhara was even the first god he destroyed."

"But!"

Junko and Fujiko were beginning to argue, so Akuto tried to cut in.

"Let's stop talking about this…"

"No, I view it a little differently."

But Yoshie spoke up and continued the discussion.

"How do you view it?"

"Most of the world's mysteries have been solved, but the problem of the soul has not been resolved. I have already proven that a soul exists separate from our body. And we do not know why that soul is created. You all remember that Zero actually had a soul, right?"

Yoshie began explaining her view.

"When L'Isle-Adams spend a long time with an individual, they gain a sense of self. If we equate a sense of self with a soul, it means that a soul can be transmitted. We are living in an unexpectedly mysterious world."

"I suppose I must agree with you about that."

As one of those involved, Fujiko had no choice but to concede the point.

"And that means souls can see souls. In which case, we might be able to see ghosts."

But when Yoshie brought her argument there, Fujiko argued back.

"But that has nothing to do with this incident. After all, human blood is a physical object."

"Well, yes. Even if it can be created with mana, it requires the original person's DNA and the proper chemical elements. It's best to assume someone was there. But I also want to agree with Junko-kun's opinion. Also, she's kind of cute when she's scared. Don't you think?"

Yoshie winked at Akuto.

"Oh…um…well… I suppose," he mumbled.

"Ah…"

Junko blushed and Fujiko immediately argued back.

"She is not cute!"

"Okay. Let's get going."

Akuto left along with Korone.

Junko and the others were left behind and they felt uneasy. Or more accurately, Junko felt uneasy.

"Th-they will be all right, won't they?"

Junko clung to Yoshie. She must not have noticed because she jumped when Yoshie began stroking her head.

"Oh, you really are cute. Good girl, good girl."

"S-stop that…"

"You're the one that grabbed on to me."

Yoshie stroked Junko's chin like she was a cat, but Junko could not move away and could only make ticklish complaints.

"Stop… no, stop!"

"Nyo, nyo, nyo. I'm gonna tickle you."

Junko was half in tears, but Yoshie intended to continue having fun.

Seeing them, Keena joined in.

"I'll do it too!"

Keena grabbed on to Junko and started petting her too.

"I said stop… Hey, that tickles!"

Junko struggled and the three of them collapsed while tangled together. They were all wearing yukatas which shifted out of place and created an immodest scene. Fujiko smiled bitterly and scolded them.

"Stop that. And it looks like Hattori-san has finally calmed down."

"Eh?"

Junko turned toward Fujiko.

"C'mon, don't say it like that. It makes it sound like I did it on purpose."

Yoshie smiled bitterly as well.

"I thought we were doing it because it was fun."

Keena was still tangled around Junko.

And then…

They heard a low, heavy creaking noise.

"Eh?"

They all froze in place and looked to the ceiling.

The creaking came from the ceiling joist.

It sounded like something heavy was hanging from the joist in the next room.

"Did someone hang themselves in the next room?"

Junko grabbed on to Yoshie once more.

This time, Yoshie was not about to play around.

"That sound is real, isn't it? In that case…"

"It would be faster to assume this is another prank!"

With a flip of her yukata hem, Fujiko charged out of the room.

She ran down the hallway and cautiously peeked into the next room while pressing her back against the wall.

And then she froze in place.

She saw the back of a girl with long hair. She had what looked like a white rope around her neck and her feet were floating in the air. She was swaying back and forth like a pendulum in time with the creaking.

"Enough pranks!"

Showing no fear, Fujiko immediately fired a mana sphere into the hanged girl.

She held back so as not to do any damage to the room. She was mainly trying to determine what this was.

A small explosion of light burst out and filled the room with light.

"This sensation…"

But the light sensation confused her.

"There was something there, wasn't there?"

Keena arrived and peered in the room from behind Fujiko.

"I saw it too. It looked like a hanged corpse.

Yoshie lined up alongside them as Junko clung to her chest.

"S-stop it… Was there really something there?"

"Yes. But it disappeared."

Fujiko shook her head.

After the explosion vanished, the room was perfectly calm and the only noise was the ticking of the clock.

"Eeeee! Then it was real?" cried Junko in fright.

"If we can't prove what it was, we can't call it a real anything. Look, it could have gone in and out as it pleased."

Fujiko entered the room and pointed at the ceiling. The ceiling panels were loose and could be easily removed. Leaving through the ceiling would not have been impossible.

"We should wait obediently in the room until Akuto-sama returns," said Fujiko.

After returning to the room, they sat around with serious expressions and speaking little.

"P-please say something…" begged Junko in a trembling voice.

"It is a little too gloomy in here." Yoshie folded her arms. "Not that I think I can feel cheerful right now."

"If this is an attack by someone, we should stay put unless they attack this room," said Fujiko calmly. "We need an escape route, but this place is so cheaply made that we can easily break through a window or even a wall. How about we calm down and drink some tea for now?"

"It would kind of be a relief to find out it really is a ghost," said Keena innocently.

Junko shook her head back and forth.

"No it would not! Not at all!"

"I have to side with Keena on this one," said Fujiko. "If this is someone targeting Keena, it may be too much for us. Or rather, I do not want that responsibility."

"If you get down to it, I guess I agree," said Yoshie. "But whether this is something physical or something spiritual, we're definitely in a strange place. Mana acts oddly here. I'd only ever heard rumors, but places like

that are known as mystery zones. In those places, gravity acts oddly and things happen that drive people insane."

"There is no need to discuss that. We need to decide what to do in case there is a threat."

"Our only choice is to protect Keena and run away. If something happens, we'll leave this mystery zone. That should be our priority."

Fujiko and Yoshie began to gain a sense of danger.

"B-but we won't fall victim to a deadly curse, will we?"

Junko had yet to let go of Yoshie.

"Well, if that happens, there isn't much we can do. There's no point in worrying about it."

"I still say a ghost would be fun," insisted Keena. "Ghosts turn invisible, make strange noises, and scare people, right?"

"You can do all of that yourself," said Fujiko in annoyance.

Keena pouted her lips.

"Eh? You shouldn't say people are like ghosts. …Ah."

Keena stood up to complain further, but she dropped her empty teacup as she did.

"Oh, no. I dropped it."

She reached out an arm.

And a white hand came from under the table, picked up the teacup, and handed it to her.

"Th-thanks."

She returned the teacup to the table and started to speak again.

"As I was saying…"

But the others were completely motionless.

They all stared closely at their own hands.

They then stopped moving again, but a moment later Junko screamed and they raced to be the first out of the room.

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"I cannot detect it very well, but from the voices and vibrations, there are several people inside the inn," said Korone.

Akuto and Korone were currently walking around the inn. They had yet to find Nozomi.

"But that can't be, can it?"

"Not counting Nozomi-san, the only workers at the inn are her parents and the single servant L'Isle-Adam. The couple is at the reception desk and the L'Isle-Adam is working in the garden."

"And you would receive a report if someone arrived from outside, right?"

"Yes. But I cannot currently receive telepathic communications. The mana is unstable. But if something did happen, the Imperial Knights would arrive to inform me directly."

"This doesn't make any sense. What is going on?"

Akuto looked at the box in his hand that contained the Imperial Seal. They had brought it from the basement, but it did not seem like anything more than a box containing an antique.

"At any rate, this is the only place Nozomi-san could be. The sealed room."

Korone pointed forward.

Akuto placed a hand on the door and found it was unlocked.

"It doesn't seem especially sealed to me."

"The knights performed their secret preliminary investigation, but they said nothing about a sealed room."

"If we don't find Nozomi-san here, let's head back to the room."

Akuto entered the sealed room.

It looked a lot like a storeroom. The walls on either side were covered in shelves and the shelves were lined with antiques. Other than the large

vase placed conspicuously in the back, nothing seemed particularly out of the ordinary. That might change if they investigated each individual antique, though.

"Is this the vase she was talking about?"

Akuto headed further in. The vase was about as tall as a child and it was white with a complex blue pattern. Akuto peered into it and drew back in surprise.

Nozomi was inside.

"What are you doing in there?"

"E-eeee! It's here! Help me! Forgive me!"

She was in a state of confusion.

"Hey, just calm down."

As soon as he said that, he heard a distant explosion. That was the mana sphere that Fujiko had fired, but he had no way of knowing that.

"We can deal with her later. We need to hurry back."

With that instruction to Korone, Akuto tried to return.

But Nozomi was clinging to his arm.

"Oh, thank goodness! You're human! Don't go! I-it's here! It's really here! Please help me! It's scary! It's too scary!"

"L-let go of me. You heard that explosion, didn't you?"

"Th-that's why you need to help me! There's a monster! A real monster!"

Nozomi was crying.

Akuto turned to Korone, but she was holding a hand to her ear.

"I hear Etou-san and the others speaking. It is a normal conversation. Everything appears to be okay."

"Hm? I don't think they would cause an explosion just for fun."

"Based on the conversation, they seem to have seen something."

"So it was a ghost or a monster?"

Akuto turned back to Nozomi.

She was clinging to him while crying.

"Like I said! There really is one! I saw a hairy monster! I'm sorry! I was lying before! But what happened here is true! I know you won't believe me, but there was a monster!"

Akuto could not make sense of what she was saying, but he could only assume she had seen something she did not expect to see.

"Well, it seems something is happening. That's for sure. Let's head back with her. We have the Imperial Seal, so we can contact the Imperial Knights."

As he spoke, Akuto lifted Nozomi out of the vase, left the sealed room, and checked his surroundings. The room was at the corner of an L-shaped turn of the hallway. When he looked down the narrow hallway to the right, a chill ran down his spine.

Standing at the end of the hallway were two small children with bobbed hair and wearing worn-out kimono undershirts. They had identical but differently-colored kimono undershirts, they had the same hairstyle, and they faces were equally well-featured, so they looked like twins. They said nothing and simply stared at him.

But Akuto managed to calm down and prepare himself. The twins then vanished down the hallway as if sliding.

"What was that?"

He turned toward Korone, but this time he saw Junko and the others screaming and running toward him.

"Waaaah! Help me, Akuto! I'm going to be killed!"

Junko clung to him.

"C-calm down. You aren't going to be killed!"

He wrapped his arms around her shoulders to calm her.

"That girl is too scared to be of any use," said Fujiko as she casually embraced him. "We need to be dealing with the actual threat right now."

"Hey, A-chan. Do you feel anything funny?" asked Keena as she grabbed onto his arm. "It feels kind of exciting!"

Keena was acting different from normal which increased his unease, but Yoshie pressed up against his back before he could say anything.

"Oh, sorry. Everyone was doing it, so I thought I would too."

"S-stop that… A-anyway, I understand, so calm down. If we are up against something with an actual form, we can do something about it."

He called out to all of them.

"All of them" being everyone clinging to him. Junko was in front, Fujiko was on his right arm, Keena was on the left, Yoshie was on his back, and Nozomi and Korone were clinging to either leg.

"Korone, it's pretty obvious you're doing that as a joke. …And the rest of you, let go. Look, there's nothing-…"

As he spoke, Akuto pointed down the hall.

But there was something there.

It was a tall girl. Her hair was long enough to almost reach the ground. Her bangs hung straight down and completely hid her face. Her slender body was covered by a plain dress. The strangest part was her movement. The joints of her arms and legs moved like a spider or crab. Also, she even moved portions very close to the trunk of her body that one normally did not think about as having joints. Her shoulder blades and pelvis slid forward and back, left and right as she walked forward.

Yes, she was approaching Akuto and the girls.

Her creepy movement left Akuto speechless. When the others noticed his reaction, they reflexively looked in the same direction.

"Waaaah!"

Even Fujiko and Yoshie screamed this time. Only Korone remained calm. Junko went beyond simply losing her composure.

"No! I am going to die from a curse! That is the legendary spirit told of by my family. My grandmother told me about it. That is the physical form of a curse that kills you with just a touch!"

"C-calm down. You're a strong girl. You can cut down any enemy. So let's just start by moving away a bit."

The girl's creepy appearance had made Akuto hesitate, but he had decided to act on the assumption she was an enemy.

But…

"What!? That is how you see me?"

Junko appeared to have received quite a shock, so Akuto frantically denied it.

"No, it isn't. I know you're actually sensitive and have all sorts of cute aspects to you. I'm just saying we need that strength right now."

"Thanks. I am glad to hear that at the end."

"W-wait. What do you mean 'the end'?"

"Aren't we all about to die?"

"No, we aren't," denied Akuto, but Junko was staring off into the distance.

"You are only saying that so as not to worry us. But I love that kindness of yours. I can say it now. I know it is cowardly to only confess my feelings on the verge of death, but I can be honest now. I love you. I love you from the bottom of my heart. Please hold me until we die!"

Junko wrapped her arms tightly around Akuto.

"Wait… Um…"

Akuto blushed and was unsure what to say.

That had undeniably been a confession of love.

"Please… Please just tell me you love me!" shouted Junko.

She looked up at him while clinging to him.

Unsurprisingly, Fujiko could not remain silent after hearing that.

"Please stop joking! You are not the only one to love Akuto-sama! Why will you not return my love? Give us a clear answer now, Akuto-sama. Which one of us do you love?"

Fujiko also looked up at him while asking her question in a demanding tone.

"Why now…?"

"The time does not matter! This is an important issue!"

"Hm, if we're doing this, how about putting me in as a candidate?" said Yoshie.

"A-chan, I have a funny feeling in my chest. I want to know too!"

Keena also clung to him with a somehow desperate ring to her voice.

Akuto was bewildered and he glanced over toward the monster. She had already arrived quite close by.

"Gogagagagegigagagigogogogogogo…"

She spoke as if her throat had been crushed as she approached.

"Okay, fine! I'll do it." He began to speak with a serious expression. "It isn't that I've been indecisive. As you know, I am a special existence. For that reason, the one I should be with is Keena."

The group froze in shock when they heard that.

"But if you want my honest opinion, I love all of you. The story of loving a single person is another illusion. I want to respond to all of your feelings. I am still an unstable existence and I haven't decided what my future will be yet. But once I decide how I will live my life, I will definitely live for all of your sakes. That is my answer."

Akuto spoke decisively.

"That goes beyond indecisive…"

"It sounded like he was saying he would make all of us his…"

"Oh? I'm fine with that."

"A-chan, I still have a funny feeling in my chest."

As they all muttered their thoughts, their expression relaxed as if the venom had been removed.

"Anyway, that is how I truly feel."

Akuto was confused by the odd atmosphere.

But they were not the only ones who were confused.

"Guga…"

The monster's cheeks flushed as if she were embarrassed. She lifted her hair to reveal her face and she – Arnoul – placed her hands on her cheeks.

"I'm not sure what to say when faced with a romantic scene like that, arinsu."

Ootake Michie appeared and her cheeks were also flushed.

"Ahh, ahh. This is what happens when we scare someone who wasn't a target, gya."

Kamiyama Kanna also walked down the hallway.

The three student council officers were all gathered.

"H-h-huh?"

Junko frantically looked between the three of them in confusion.

The others were also surprised to varying degrees.

"Was this all the student council's doing?" asked Akuto.

Michie nodded.

"That's right, arinsu. But in our defense, we didn't know you all would be here, arinsu. Or rather, we didn't when we were putting together our plan, arinsu."

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"After the previous incident, we became friends with the L'Isle-Adam here named Monami and we came to play with her, gya," said Kanna. "We heard Nozomi was planning something odd, so we thought we would give her a scare instead, gya."

"Then the blood in the bath was you?" asked Fujiko.

Michie embarrassedly brought her hands to her cheeks.

"I was hiding there and I got a nosebleed when I saw your immodest behavior, arinsu."

"Wasn't that a little much for a nosebleed?"

"I have a special condition that lets me create blood indefinitely as long as I have the nutrients, arinsu. I must eat red things to keep it up, though, arinsu."

"Y'know…"

Fujiko could not believe what she was hearing.

"Then the hanged girl and that last thing was you too?" asked Yoshie.

Arnoul nodded.

"Guga."

"Then what about that hand?" asked Akuto.

A voice responded from the hallway to the right.

"When I heard about this from them, I thought it sounded like fun. And thanks to that interesting scene just now, it was even more fun than I expected. That's the problem with a lady killer like you."

Student Council President Lily Shiraishi approached while grinning. Walking next to her were two children wearing kimono undershirts: Monami and Keisu.

"Now Nozomi can't act so superior all the time."

"Boss, I made a friend who has Japanese clothes that fit me!"

Monami and Keisu waved happily.

"But I thought no one could approach because of the Imperial Knights," said Akuto.

Lily shrugged.

"They're really full of themselves and they don't know me, so a few of them tried to attack me. If they were friends of yours, you should've said so."

"I wouldn't say they're friends, but they're the Imperial Knights."

"Who cares about the details? Now, how about you use that open-air bath. I think there are a few girls here who want to wash your back for you."

Lily grinned cruelly.

Junko had remained oddly silent, but she started speaking in a bitter voice.

"I…I…I…"

"Are you okay?"

Akuto placed a worried hand on her shoulder.

But she suddenly brushed it off.

"I…I…I confessed…"

Her shoulders trembled as she squeezed out her voice. And then she started shouting.

"I confessed! And in front of everyone!"

She blushed and began flailing her limbs around, but everyone responded coldly.

"Are you an idiot? Everyone already knows that."

"And what's wrong with it? Your confession was a success."

"And since it succeeded, shouldn't you be thanking your upperclassman instead of getting angry?" complained Lily.

"Waaah! This is too embarrassing! This is all your fault!"

Junko seemed to try to punch Akuto or something similar because she waved her hand around and toppled in an odd direction.

"W-watch out."

He tried to support her, but she tumbled into one of the antique-filled shelves in the sealed room.

A loud crash filled the late-night inn and an even more delicate atmosphere surrounded the group.

"Ahh, ahh. That ruined the mood."

"Honestly, what was that? The student council isn't paying for it."

Fujiko and Lily, the upperclassmen, gave their respective complaints.

Korone then spoke up after noticing something.

"But one problem has not been resolved: the mana abnormality."

"Did you detect something?" asked Akuto.

Korone nodded and pointed down the hallway.

Everyone looked in that direction.

A woman wearing white stood there. Her long hair and slender body were the same as Arnoul's, but she had a noble air about her that Arnoul had lacked.

But there was an even greater difference.

"Hey, who is that?"

"I don't know, gya."

"Do any of you?"

Lily asked Akuto that, but he shook his head.

"What even is it?"

"It is not human," declared Korone. "I also cannot hear a heartbeat or any mechanical noises."

Hearing that, Lily gave a snort.

"Hmph. Stop right there. I know you're made from mana."

She extended an arm toward the woman and tried to grab her shoulder, but her hand only reached empty air.

"Eh?"

When her hand passed right through the woman's body, even Lily's eyes opened wide.

"That isn't mana…"

She extended her hand toward the woman a few more times, but the woman walked forward as if that hand was not there. But "walk" might not have been the best term as her legs were not moving. She was sliding forward while standing straight.

"Don't tell me this one is real," shrieked Junko.

Her hips gave out and she crawled over to cling to Akuto's leg.

Akuto placed a hand on her head.

"But I don't see any ill intent."

True enough, the woman's air of nobility remained even as she approached. Her slightly narrowed eyes glowed as if trying to say something.

And then Korone spoke.

"Her appearance has allowed me to locate the center of the mana abnormality. It is one of the antiques on the shelf Hattori-san knocked over. That appears to be the source."

"That is?"

Junko stood up in surprise and turned toward the antiques she had knocked over.

A wooden box had opened and a small wooden branch that glowed gold could be seen inside. It looked like a normal decoration at first, but it emitted a light different from mana. It was the same light that came from the approaching woman.

"Eh!?" shouted Akuto.

A similar glow came from the small box he held. In other words, the Imperial Seal was emitting light.

"Wh-what?"

Junko turned toward Korone to demand an explanation.

Korone shook her head.

"I do not know. This may be a secret of a former emperor."

Nozomi was trembling in fear and clinging to Akuto's leg, but Korone took her hand and stood her up.

"Fweh? Wh-wh-what are you doing?"

Nozomi looked confused as the light from the Imperial Seal and small branch reflected from her forehead.

"Your family does not contain imperial blood. But it has likely been following an order made by an emperor. Your unexplainable bad luck may be the power of the Imperial Seal or this small branch. It may be a means of preventing anyone from finding them."

As Korone explained, Nozomi's eyes opened wide.

"Then we were a family that served the imperial family?"

Nozomi's voice trembled and tears gushed forth as if washing away all of her previous worries.

"Well, I guess this is a happy ending. But what happens to her now?"

Akuto turned to Keena.

"I don't really know. But she's supposed to serve the empress," she said.

As if in response, the glowing woman spoke.

"Bearer of the Imperial Seal, the preparations are complete. For the creation of the true empire, return the Jewel Branch of Hourai to its rightful place."

No one was able to say anything in response.

Except for Keena, that is. She tugged on Akuto's sleeve and pouted her lips.

"Hey, A-chan. I told you I had a funny feeling in my chest."

Afterword

Thank you once again. This is Mizuki Shoutarou.

We have already reached double digits with Volume 10. This one was a collection of short stories, so I think it should be easygoing and enjoyable. I made this volume so you can read it on its own, so you can enjoy it if you learned about the series from the anime but do not want to buy all ten volumes. As for the story…well, you can see for yourself. If I had to explain it, I would say it is the three student council officers' first time in the spotlight. Seeing them with voices in the anime made me realize I needed to write this.

Now, about the anime. It finished airing while remaining popular. The story of the original novels remained intact and they did a wonderful job that presented things in many challenging ways. The voice actors all did an amazing job and were really onboard with their performances. The DVDs and BDs are on sale now. Whether you saw it or missed it, please go buy all of them. It is an excellent product that makes it well worth searching out every volume.

There is a reason I talked about the anime before talking about the contents of this volume. There is a special mini anime named "Another Bonus Demon King" that I gave some ideas for and I used some of that material in this volume. I hope you felt the same atmosphere of humorous short stories in both. I watched the recording for the mini anime and the voice actors' wonderfully over-the-top performances made it even funnier. Make sure to watch it.

Lastly, I would like to thank everyone involved and of course all of you readers. As you can see from what happened in this volume, the story will be continuing a little more. And when I say "a little more" I mean it in the same way they do in a weekly manga. Anyway, please continue reading from here on. It looks like there is plenty more to enjoy!

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新皇帝けーなのコメ・ルネッサンス勅令で、学院は大騒ぎに!?
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会長から逃げ出し、街に出た生徒会三役が巻き込まれた事件とは？
老舗旅館の一人娘で皇帝の血を引くという新キャラ、笹原望が巻き起こす騒動を軸に、短編形式でお送りする記念すべきシリーズ第10弾。

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